PHULMAT OF THE HILLS

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By the Same Author

LEAVES FROM THE JUNGLE
Life in a Gond Village

"Every once in a while there comes a book very different from the ordinary. This is a rare book, an important book, witty and delightfully written, and there is something for everybody in it."

—*Time & Tide.*

PHULMAT OF THE HILLS

A Tale of the Gonds

BY

VERRIER ELWIN

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows : yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted.

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To

THE MAIKAL HILLS

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THE INHABITANTS OF MULMULA VILLAGE

The Pardhan Household.

Julan.
Satula, his wife.
Nanas, his little son.
Jiggeri, his little daughter.

Gamira.
Phulmat.
Adri.

Chintu, Satula's father.
Bannu, her first lover.

The Gond Households.

Putchi, headman of the village.
His two wives.
Tiblu, his eldest son, in love with Singaru.

Rannu.
Tigli, his wife.
Singaru, their daughter.

Panda Baba, *gunia*, or magician, of the village.
His wife.
Tok Singh, their son, in love with Singaru.

Tutta, living with Panda Baba.
Bhuta, living alone.
Tiharu, the witch.
Her daughter, formerly married to Bhuta.

The Panka Household.

Dariya, the village watchman.
His wife and children.

The Baiga Household.

Hothu.
His wife and children.
The old *gunia*, rival to Panda Baba.

The Ahir Household.

Sitaram, cowherd of the village.
His wife and children.

The Panjabi Household.

The Panjabi, generally living alone.
His sister, who sometimes stayed with him.

These are not all the inhabitants. In most houses there are also a number of old people and children, but as they do not affect the story their names are not given. There are also eight other Gond houses in Mulmula.

The song "O Green Diwali" is quoted from *The Seoni District Gazetteer*.

CHAPTER I

POWERFUL TROUBLE

THE great snake, a full hundred feet in length, lashed round viciously. Its huge body writhed and twisted, and there were loud shouts of excitement as the long line of men, each clutching desperately at his fellow, swung to and fro. It was the Serpent Dance, climax of the great Saila of the Gond tribe, a dangerous dance, one not often seen, for if the man at the head can catch and bite the man at the tail, his victim will die of the bite of a real snake within a year.

It is always a titanic struggle. The head of the snake, drunk with wine and drugs, filled with the dark serpent power, leaps forward with demonic energy, dragging the body with him. The men behind hold him back as much as they can, but the others push them forward ; everyone is drunk, and it is hard to estimate the movements of the unwieldy line. As the head comes round, the tail dashes violently to and fro. The people of the village stand by, half entertained, half fearful.

That village seemed on the very summit of the world, so remote it was, and so long and steep the road. There was a wide green plain between trees, and on one side the country fell away, down, down to endless forest.

On the face of the hill the village spread its tiny houses. Compared with the soiled features of great cities, there was almost a virginity about the village : it was aloof from the world and its thin joys ; it would not yield quickly to the seducing spirit of the age ; it had its own pleasures, its violent joys and terrors ; it belonged to itself, there on the top of the world.

This village, Mulmula, stands high in the Maikal Range that runs a hundred miles from the Saletekri Hills to sacred Amarkantak, all its sprawling rocky limbs covered with forest. Here Malkala Rishi suffered the pains and joys of penance ; here Vyasa, Agastya and Brighu sought the truth of things in their own depths and in the vast loneliness of trees. Here rises Narbada, which one day is to surpass all other streams in sanctity, and flows westward to the sea ; and here springs the golden-armed Sone which runs five hundred miles to Ganges. It was to these evergreen forests of towering sal that the Gonds retired before the fierce onslaught of the Moghuls and the more subtle corruptions of civilization. Here live witches and every kind of ghost ; the tiger and the bear move freely in sheltered, half-forgotten glades ; wild and naked tribesmen eke out a scanty living with roots and berries. But no one can forget the Maikal Hills ; they are full of a holy magic that enchants with love and beauty. Their children cannot forsake these hills ; however far away they wander they desire to return to them before they die.

On the wide green plain at Mulmula, between trees, open to a sky glowing with a sun that moved towards

its setting, the great serpent writhed and twisted, now stopping dead, now with a sudden spurt leaping forward, now turning on its tracks. Under a tree, on a little knoll, to one side, near the well, there was a group of women ; one nursed her baby, others chattered excitedly. In front of them, a little apart, was a girl of an unusual beauty, her hands to her breast, watching every movement of the dance with strained and anxious eyes. Phulmat's face was demure, so demure it seemed that surely it was a virtue to gaze at it, it was almost Madonna-like till her smile lit it, and then it shone with the bright spirit of mischief and allurement. Then you saw that her lips were full and soft, apt for a lover, her teeth shining white, her hair brushed straight and smooth on either side, save that a cluster of fine curls gathered at her temples—but to-day it was a little tousled, some wisps of it blown across her face ; a girl of furious gold ; aloof, yet insatiable ; alluring, and yet in some strange way uplifting ; for her man a girl complete, satisfying, a focus of all delight, who would spread before him silken nets and traps of adamant. She was apart from the rest, not only by reason of her greater physical beauty, but for a difference of caste—she a Pardhan, these were Gonds ; she came of vagabond minstrel stock, they of respectable peasant families who had tilled the soil for centuries ; she was temperamental, sensitive, an artist, while they were good and homely animals.

But to-day, Phulmat's eyes had lost some of their fire ; they were over-anxious ; there was no torch in them. For the head of the Serpent Dance was Bhuta,

tall, lean, hateful Bhuta, her enemy. Long ago he had made love to her, but she had been repelled, as girls always were repelled, by his staring eyes and look of menace. She had driven him from her with a stinging word of hate that he had never forgotten ; she knew that he had sworn revenge. Perhaps now his chance had come, for the tail of the snake was Gamira, her beloved, not her husband, for she had left him long ago, but the man she loved, the man whose life she shared. How agile he was, and handsome ! Not a man there could compare with him. He was dancing with more spirit than anyone, dancing too without a drop of liquor inside him, the only fully sober man in the Saila. Suddenly she caught her breath in fear, for Bhuta swung the head of the dance round so suddenly and rapidly that he almost reached the tail. But Gamira, with a shout of laughter, leapt out of danger, and in a minute was yards away, while Bhuta halted, panting. Yet there was utmost danger, for Bhuta belonged to the Baria clan of the Gonds ; his totem was the cobra ; all his life he had revered and protected snakes ; and they in turn were bound to help him now. Gamira's clan honoured the tortoise, and what could a slow and stupid tortoise avail against a snake ?

Gamira was the first great love of Phulmat's life. Long ago, while she was still almost a child, her breasts just pushing their way upward, a Gond boy had waylaid her in the forest. There under the swaying branches of old trees, hidden by the tall reed grasses that burst at last into a spray of white maidenhair, they met again and

again, till from their young passionate bodies came a child. Then she was frightened, and begged her father to marry her at once to a man of her own caste, so that she should not be shamed before the village. He married her to a man, middle-aged, but a noteable singer, who taught her many songs and perfected the technique of her dancing. It had always been her father's ambition that she should be a fine dancer, carrying on the traditions of the tribe, and at her birth he had given her a tiny bit of the flesh of a kingfisher, so that she might grow up swift and beautiful as that lovely bird. For three years Phulmat lived with her old Pardhan, and in a way she cared for him, because of his wit, and the poetry in his songs. But his embraces were always hateful to her : he was so old, with his shaggy head and the everlasting stink of stale liquor about him ; his whole body sagged and slobbered. After that, for all her life, Phulmat shrank a little from the act of sex. Love she never shrank from, and when she gave herself it was not as the other girls did—because they enjoyed that sensation—but only because she loved the man.

And then at last, one evening, Gamira came to her village. She was drawing water at the well as he came by, his strong lithe figure stood up against the sunset. He was very dark, with long rich black hair that hung in locks round his head, and he had a necklace of bright red beads against his throat. He stood quite still for a time looking at her, and after a moment she went on with her work, ignoring him, though her blood was aflame

within her. As he waited she began to sing an old song, very quietly, as if to herself :

In the midst of the river, the tree is full of leaves,
Among the leaves, monkeys are hiding—
They are eating the fruit that grows there.
O when will I meet my true love
Who will put aside the leaves,
And pluck the oranges that grow
So round and firm upon my tree ?

She had seemed fashioned of pure gold that night, as the red and orange light of the sunset fell upon her. Gamira looked at her without speaking and passed by, but very early next morning when she went down to the river, he was there. He found her standing knee-deep in the stream, a brightly-burnished pitcher in her hands, and the morning sun shone on the bright water. Far down the river a herd of buffaloes was being driven through the water. The shouts of the cowherds and tremendous splashings came to their ears. Very shyly he asked her to come to him. She tossed her head, and bent over her pitcher, then straightened herself and said :

" I know the love of men, how well I know it—how endlessly they hunt us, their furtive looks and whispered invitations—come to me here—run with me there—meet me by the thorn-bush—and then their hot embraces. I never want it again."

" But I am not like that," he said eagerly.

"We will see," she said more gently, and his eyes fell. There was a swirl of waters, her sari brushed his arm. When he looked there was nothing save the track of her wet footprints up the bank, but the sun lit them, and to his eyes they shone with gold.

Three weeks later Gamira came again to the village. It was the time of Phag, the festival when Gond women arm themselves with sticks and cudgels and avenge themselves on mankind. They have the right to beat any man they can catch, and to go on beating him till he buys them off with a present. On the afternoon of the first day of the feast, Gamira was standing under a tree not far from Phulmat's house watching the men bring wood for the great Phag bonfire. A *gunia* was very busy calling to the people to bring out their ploughshares to be heated in the fire. It will wake them up, he was saying, and they will raise you better crops. Suddenly the laughter and cries of a band of women were heard. All the men hastily ran into their houses, and even the old wizard took shelter in a neighbouring cattle-shed. Gamira hid behind the tree and watched. The band of women approached shouting abuse at the hidden men ; several of them were drunk and all looked wild and tumbled. At the very end of their small procession came Phulmat, walking a little wearily. When the others were fairly passed, Gamira whistled softly from behind his tree. At once Phulmat came towards him, up went her stick, and she caught him a resounding blow across the back. He seized hold of the stick and tried to take it from her. Phulmat was shorter than he, but very

strong, and for a few moments they struggled together laughingly for possession. Slowly he drew her nearer to him, until at last her warm body was touching his, and her face—over which the hair was blowing wildly, giving her a gipsy look—was close to him. Suddenly he dropped the stick and caught her in his arms. "To-morrow," he whispered. There was time only for one word ; the other women were returning. She nodded, and then picking up her stick began to beat him again, and the other girls ran to help her. Gamira countered their assault with a stream of *gali*, but at last brought four pice out of the fold of his dhoti, and with this bought his freedom.

The following night Gamira and Phulmat ran away. Phulmat's husband had indeed already tired of her, and for some months had sought consolation in the arms of her elder sister who was, as he said, more his size. Little trouble was made, and Gamira took her, when their forest-honeymoon was over, to live in his uncle Julan's house at Mulmula. Thus peacefully began the first great love-adventure of Phulmat's life. The young Gond in the jungle had stirred her blood ; even now she felt a wild longing rush through her as she thought of him, and a deep sorrow for the child who had died at birth. But their love had been too furtive and hurried ; in Gamira at last her passion had its full-rounded opportunity. She could give herself to him, completely, free from alarm, at leisure, yet without losing the strong excitement of adventure and exploration.

That was why she gazed now at the dance with eyes

strained with fear. The snake was moving faster and faster, its contortions grew wilder every moment. Bhuta seemed veritably possessed by the spirit of the snake ; he darted forward ; then, checked by those who clung to him, reared up into the air, his head flung back, mouth open, eyes ablaze, hissing savagely. Again and again, by a sudden twisting movement, he forced round the line of men, and Gamira only just escaped him. If he were to trip once, he would be caught. And, as Phulmat could see, with a great quickening of her fears, Gamira had lost some of his fire. Perhaps, after all, he should have drunk a little. He appeared tired and careless. Indeed the whole line of dancers was almost exhausted. Perhaps in a few minutes they would decide to stop.

Even Bhuta seemed at the end of his resources. He stood panting heavily, the sweat poured from him, his tongue lolled out of his mouth. But those staring eyes fell on Phulmat, and the fire of hatred sprang into them, and new strength into his body. He jumped into the air with a loud strange hissing sound, throwing his head to and fro, and before Gamira had realized that his breathing-space was over, had dragged the line round till he was almost on him. Gamira jumped for safety, but caught his foot against a fallen branch and fell heavily to the ground. Instantly Bhuta was upon him. For a moment he towered above, both arms upraised, his hands like talons, a figure of menace, then he struck downwards, and buried his teeth deep in his victim's shoulder. A thrill of horror passed through the spectators, and

Phulmat started forward to the rescue. The body of the snake broke at once, and a dozen men ran to seize Bhuta, who was raving like a madman, his limbs twitching spasmodically, his lips red with blood. But it was too late. When Phulmat reached her lover she saw that the snake indeed had bitten. Gamira would die within the year.

CHAPTER II

SOUR-SWEET DAYS

An old man dragged himself slowly and painfully across the courtyard of the little house. His skin glistened strangely in the sunlight. His hands were the merest stumps, rounded and smooth ; here and there a patch of white showed oddly against the brown skin ; his feet were large and swollen, bound up with dirty rags. His ears were thick, their lobes pendulous and heavy ; his face had a fierce and dangerous look, the look of a lion ; but when you saw his eyes, you saw that they were filled with a great kindliness and humour. A wreck of a man, but the wreck, obviously, of a great man. It was Gamira's uncle, Julan, now ten years a leper.

Into the shade he went, through a small ante-chamber —here was a rough wooden seat, there a rice-pounder made of heavy amaltas wood—out on to the verandah in front, and there he settled himself under the little roof that jutted forward into the village street.

The house was small and very clean ; its walls gleamed white in the sun. They were substantial walls, not like Rannu's opposite, mere plastered bamboo slats, but made of solid mud, built up slowly, laboriously, layer

by layer. There were four buildings altogether in the Pardhan establishment. In the central house lived Julan himself with his beautiful young wife Satula, and their children Nanas and Jiggeri. To the right of them Gamira and Phulmat had made their home ; on the left was a store-room with great bins for keeping rice and kodon, gram and wheat ; and in front was this ante-chamber which was the sole entrance to the entire compound and had a strong ancient door, fantastically carved with elephants and monkeys. There were elephants on the walls too, done in mud, and in one place the splendid twelve-pointed head of a barasingha. The roof was thatched with coarse hard sena grass. All round the house was the *bari*, a fenced-in field planted with tobacco, sweet potatoes and some struggling beans. There was a pit whose refuse slowly matured into manure. In one corner stood a cattle-shed, but they only had two small bullocks in those days, so it was a very small shed.

It was a Pardhan house, the only Pardhan house in Mulmula. Julan was one of the few remaining Sonthagas who in the old days, before the Pardhans had become respectable, made a profitable career of cheating with imitation gold. Julan's father had been a man of authority and expert knowledge ; he had been three times in jail, and for years had held the office of Mokasi or headman of the group of Sonthagas, distributing their gains and enjoying the delicate and pleasant duty of bribing village officials and the lesser police. Julan still held the title by courtesy, though the old organization

had long since been disbanded. When he was sitting in the privacy of the family circle, he would sometimes tell of the tricks his father used to play on his victims. He kept a store of brass, and just before the bazaar days would burn a bit of it among the embers of mahua bark, for this—he had discovered—gave the brass an orange-red colour that looked like gold. Once, at the Chak-maktola bazaar, he bought a pair of bullocks from an old Gond whose wits were somewhat crazed by opium. The price was twenty-one rupees. When the bargain had been properly concluded the Mokasi undid his turban to take out the money, but there was no more than a few annas. When he saw this, he began to shout that he had been robbed. The Gond got thoroughly frightened, partly that he would be accused of the theft, partly that he would lose his bargain—for it was a splendid bargain, the bargain of the year ; the bullocks were worth no more than fifteen. So when the Mokasi went up to him and began whispering in his ear, he found a ready listener.

The Mokasi said that he was in great need of the bullocks ; he had undertaken to plough a field, and might be put in jail if he failed to fulfil his obligations. He had a little gold with him. It was worth much more than twenty-one rupees, but as he didn't know where it came from . . . He paused suggestively. There was no need to say more. The old Gond nodded, a light of greed and understanding dawned in his opium-clouded eyes. The gold was stolen ! What luck he had ! He would make a double bargain. Then the

wily Mokasi brought out his bit of brass, carefully wrapped in wild cotton, and showed it to his victim. The old man was beside himself with excitement. He took it in his hand, weighed it, admired its rich golden tint; it was worth at least forty rupees. "If you will give me five rupees and the bullocks," said the Mokasi, "it will be yours." There was no more discussion. With trembling fingers the Gond produced five rupees from the little bag that hung at his waist, handed them over to the Mokasi, and went off rejoicing with his bit of brass.

Another day, Julan himself, then a mere boy of twelve—it was the year before his father's death, when all their activities came to an end—went to Amarkantak and tricked a well-to-do sadhu in very similar fashion, pretended that he had stolen the "gold," and sold it to the holy man for seventeen rupees. It was this trick that had won him the title of Mokasi after his father's death.

But now for years Julan had led a settled and peaceful life, tilling the soil until his leprosy came heavy upon him, but still thinking occasionally of the great and adventurous days that were past. He was still the leader of the tribe in all the country from Pendra to Seoni, settled every dispute, demanded fines, arranged marriages.

Julan and also Gamira—who was his brother's son—belonged to the Netam clan of Pardhans, which is named after the dog, but which actually honours the tortoise. All tribal society is divided into clans whose members

must not marry one another ; most of the clans have a totem to which they are bound by special ties. Thus it was Julan's solemn duty not only to refrain from killing a tortoise himself, but if ever he saw a neighbour about to kill one, he must fall at his feet and offer him money or a plump chicken in its place. Fortunately, he used to say, tortoises were not common in that village. Phulmat, of course, belonged to a different clan, or she could not have lived with Gamira. She was a daughter of Parteti, the crocodile, and once when she heard that a crocodile had been killed, she broke the earthen pots in her house, and fasted for a whole day. Happily this had happened only once, but she had never ceased talking about it. It proved her loyalty to tribal tradition.

It was Satula who was most inconvenienced by this custom. She belonged to the Eti-Kumras, who never kill or eat a goat. The story was that long ago the founder of their clan sacrificed a little boy to Bara Deo, cut him up and hid him in his basket. The parents caught him and insisted on searching him. In his extremity he called on Bara Deo for help, and when the parents opened the basket the boy had disappeared and they found only the dismembered limbs of a goat.

And so, since that day, the Eti-Kumras never kill the goat. This made things very difficult in the house, for Julan liked nothing better than a curry of goat's flesh, and though the Eti-Kumras had long since given up the habit of mourning every time a goat was killed—that happened far too often—Satula always

went through the form of begging the household to spare the creature, and of course she would not enter the kitchen while it was being cooked. But when Phulmat came, matters improved ; she was an excellent cook, knew just how long to boil the meat, the exact proportion of oil, haldi, salt, chili that should be added ; she could make the most of the crude flavourings at her command. When the meat was chopped up into the little squares they called *durree*, her guests sometimes fought for them, snatching them from their neighbours' plates, possessed by greed of the tasty morsels. She could also prepare the bitter kerela so adroitly that the other villagers wished they could eat from her hands as they caught the savour of it on the wind. She made an excellent chutney of wild mango ; your mouth watered at her curry of kachnar flowers ; but best of all was her preparation of roast *haril*, the green pigeon that the tribesmen prefer above all other birds.

Julan settled himself as comfortably as possible on a pile of old sacking, and his kind, humorous, inquisitive eyes made a survey of the scene before him. Save one, his house was higher up the hill than all the others. It was only a short distance before the road, submerged now and then in clumps of sharp dry spears of grass, mounted the crest of the hill and disappeared in the forest-clad plateau above. It was two years now since he had climbed up to that wind-swept green plain, with the dwarf and stunted trees that bent to the gales. He hardly went outside his house nowadays, unless it was opposite to visit Rannu or just round the corner up the

hill to see Sitaram the Ahir, the cowherd who looked after the village cattle. But he could sit here on the verandah, and see most of what was going on.

The leper watched the road making its way between the little houses. It was hot afternoon. There was no one about. A big black pig trotted out into the road and began nosing along between the stones. Yes, that was surely the headman's pig, a pig of honour, a consecrated pig. Last year it had been castrated, and a little bit of the ear and the tail had been removed. In two years' time it would be sacrificed to Narayan Deo for the protection of the village. And there was the headman himself, Putchi, the man with a tail—that's what his name meant and very properly, an ugly, stumpy, noisy little man, with a big head and always a large turban. He had a black waistcoat and two wives, for he was ambitious. When asked how he kept the peace between his wives, he said that his policy was to sleep with neither, but always with someone else, and so they got on very well and there was no jealousy. Julan used to quote the old proverb about him—his snores disturb the dust, but his dreams are of a landlord's bungalow. Now he called himself a Raj-Gond, and wore a thread like any petty Brahmin clerk, refusing to eat from the hands of ordinary Gonds, let alone a Pardhan Gond like himself. What nonsense it was! But Putchi was a good shot. Only two nights ago a leopard had dragged a calf out of Sitaram's house, and when it had returned the next evening to enjoy the kill, Putchi had shot it right through the centre of the forehead, a

beautiful shot. That was a good boy, his eldest son Tiblu, a handsome youngster, and very respectful to old people like himself. It was a good thing that he and Gamira were such friends.

Julan's thoughts wandered away to his own youth then, his youth of dance and music, his adventures in the forest. Most of all he had loved the forest, that world which is varied as human life—the tall and lordly sal rubbing branches with the humble char whose fruit he had loved to pick, the rough and prickly semur with its great red flowers on black leafless branches, the flaming orange of the palas beneath whose shade he had once met and killed a bear. He recalled the time, when he and others were out gathering the luscious purple jamun berries, they had caught a young sambhur, killed it, and with many an anxious look for the forest-guard, had cooked and eaten it on the spot. It was that very day that he had heard among the trees the voice of the girl who had given him her leprosy. Even now he caught his breath as he remembered. It was her singing that had entranced him, that music of the forest-songs whose rhythm sets the whole body *ting-ting ting-ting*, quivering like a wire, alive with passion. It is free, happy, triumphant lust translated into sound. He would have married her, but she was a daughter of Netam, belonged to the same clan, and tribal law forbade it. He had met her again years afterwards, when her fate lay heavy upon her, and all her beauty was gone—even that glorious voice was cracked. But like the great lover he was, he had treated her with all the old consideration and had

feigned at least the old passion, went with her to gather wild mangoes in the forest—both tottering on their maimed and tortured feet—sent her home glowing with happiness. She was dead now.

Julan frowned irritably as a loud yelling began in the house nearly opposite but a little distance down the road, under a clump of mahua trees. The sweet sickly smell of the flowers drifted over to him. That was the house of Hothu the Baiga with his swarm of dirty screaming brats and his hag of a wife, her long breasts pulled out of all shape by one child after another. A nice simple fellow, very humorous, a fine story-teller, not so good as their Gond Panda though. Pity they cleaned themselves with leaves instead of water. He couldn't go into their house or take their food because of that. In any case a Baiga house was always messy and there was nothing in it ; no grain-bins, no store of food. Daily they went out into the jungle to dig roots. Or they gathered the mahua flowers and crushed them into a paste. Why couldn't they feed properly ? Why couldn't they use the clean white mud from the hills which made everything tidy at once ? They said it was a curse upon them for breaking the breast of Mother Earth with the plough, but it was really a curse upon their laziness. A tall fellow, Hothu, and dignified, very gentle, and he had a good walk, slow and purposeful. Julan rubbed his head with the stump of his right arm. A fly settled on a sore just above his ankle, and he waved it away, exasperated. What an impotent creature he was, no more a man in the full sense ; there was no

calamity greater than that. Not even the flies were afraid of him. This one settled on the sore again. This time he killed it. That was better. There was to be some meat for supper to-day ; they had killed a deer, secretly. Everyone in the village had got his share. How charmingly Hothu crinkled up his forehead when he told his absurd stories, and his mouth curled itself into smiles that set you smiling too. When he was born they touched his tongue with a razor, and now he had grown up talkative as a barber ; it was a useful charm. A good fellow certainly, but it was three months since he washed last and you couldn't sit to windward of him.

Next door to Hothu was Dariya, the village watchman, and then came a house which bore marks of the extreme of poverty, with a broken fence and straw awry on the roof, the home of the two old Gonds Rannu and Tigli. Rannu was the most amiable man in Mulmula, but he was broken, a shattered giant among the other Gonds. Even now you could not pass by that large, handsome, ravaged face, the deep-set eyes circled by a thousand wrinkles, the strong sensuous mouth. What a record he had ! They said there was not a girl . . . but the less said of that the better ! Well, he was paying for it. The hot fire of syphilis had him now, had tortured him for years, until to-day he couldn't walk properly ; his legs and arms went jerking in all directions. He was like a tiger, thought Julan, a tiger whose teeth were drawn, who now had no other business than to be kind and look pathetically at you out of those deep eyes.

His wife, Tigli, was still a grand old lady ; she had helped Rannu in his adventures, had given him every freedom, and so he always came back to her, and they remained lovers even in their old age. Julan was very fond of her : she was his gossip ; almost every day they sat together on the verandah and settled the affairs of the village which was their world, and more particularly the affairs of Rannu's daughter, the young and lovely Singaru.

Julan began to dream of Singaru then ; all the village dreamt of her ; she was so aloof and quiet ; the men were afraid of her, they said she really was a virgin, she was exquisite, and quiet and apart. Julan mused over that mystery, how one could be beautiful and yet have no desire, then roused himself as two men came round the corner at the bottom of the street. They were a curious contrast, the two new-comers. Panda Baba was short, but intensely alive, he was the *gunia* or magician of the village, shrewd, tactful, intelligent, an adept in the mysteries of the world of spirits. Julan's face brightened as he saw him. Now he would hear all the news. He had been starved for news lately, for Tigli had not been cooking for the last three days, and she never came to talk to him during that period. After Tigli's conversation, there was nothing Julan enjoyed more than a talk with Panda Baba, for the two were of a temperament, caustic yet kindly, seeing into the truth of things through their own admitted follies, sparing neither themselves nor others. They were always quarrelling, and abusing each other with strange new words that were

treasured by everyone who heard them ; but after an hour or so they would forget all about it, and without even the hint of an apology carry on as if nothing had happened.

For years Panda Baba had enjoyed a lucrative and distinguished position as *gunia* of the village. His advice was sought by despised lovers and those whose crops had failed. His charms were indispensable for the recovery of the sick, the success of the hunter, the potency of the bridegroom. But recently, to his intense mortification and annoyance, an old Baiga had been coming to stay from time to time in Hothu's house, and some of the less intelligent and more flighty members of the village had been consulting him. Even his own son, Tok Singh, whom he was himself training to be a magician, had not been above going to him for some roots which were supposed to be an infallible cure for impotence. It was absurd. In any case, since he was not married, it didn't matter whether the boy was impotent or not. It was ridiculous. People, felt Panda Baba, got most exaggerated ideas about the Baigas. In the old days, possibly there was something. They could walk on the water, he had heard, fly through the air, wield monstrous weapons, bring back the dead to life. Their love-magic was said to have been powerful. But nowadays you couldn't seduce a Dhobin with it. They called up the spirits anyhow, had forgotten their own proper rituals. And their other habits ! Their use of leaves ! Their spurious respect for Mother Earth ! Panda Baba felt quite sick and giddy

whenever he allowed himself to think of all those unwashed bottoms.

All the same, Panda Baba still enjoyed a fairly extensive practice. The Pardhan household especially never thought of consulting anyone else. He had helped Satula through her confinements, buried the umbilical cords of Nanas and Jiggeri in precisely the right places, repeating above them the appropriate charms; he had saved Phulmat from a troublesome ghost who visited her nightly and tried to strangle her. Though he had not been able to cure Julan of his leprosy, the old man always welcomed him to the house with eagerness.

But Julan was less pleased when he saw Panda Baba's companion. That was Bhuta, for the last month an open enemy of their house. If Panda Baba represented the benignant spirits of the other world, you might suppose Bhuta to be a dark spirit of evil at his back. He also was a wizard, but of less power and authority than Panda. As he walked he leant forward in a sort of menace, as if he would like to pounce on you. He had the most honeyed tongue in the village, but his body was full of poison. Jealous, revengeful, ever brooding on his wrongs, he was quiet with a deadly efficiency of evil. His staring, angry eyes darted restlessly to and fro, as if he were searching for some happiness which ever eluded him. In his youth he had married a lovely girl, the loveliest, it was said, in the district, but after a year with him she developed a disabling disease which made it impossible for her to give him intimacy. He tried to force her; her screams of pain brought the neighbours

to the rescue ; he waited a month, a restless raging beast, and then he left her alone with her pain, still loving him, still beautiful, helpless on her bed. She was in the village still, in her mother's dark little house, beautiful with a luminous purified loveliness, but helpless ; somehow she was ashamed and seldom came out into the sun. Her mother Tiharu was a witch, and it was murmured that she had put so powerful a spell on Bhuta that he could never keep any other girl. He had tried. He lived with a girl for a few months, then she left him. He tried again, and this time the girl died mysteriously, of an unknown disease. The third time he took an elderly woman, but one night she ran screaming from his house. Then no woman would come near him. Those staring eyes inhibited desire ; people began to say that they could see the curse of Tiharu as a black shadow about his head. One ugly night he had tried to rape the aloof, unvanquished Singaru, but Gamira had rescued her, and, with the help of Tiblu and Sitaram, had given him a thrashing that had laid him up for a month. So now he lived alone, with the whole world of evil spirits at his call, his hut decorated with strange symbols, his ways apart.

The two men, not speaking, drew level with the house. Bhuta passed by without a greeting, but Panda Baba stopped, his old face creasing into a smile.

" Babu Johar," said Julan, for that is how the Pardhans must greet a Gond.

" Mokasi Johar," returned Panda Baba, walking on to the verandah and sitting down beside the leper. " You

have no smoke, old friend, let me prepare something for you."

"That is very good," said Julan. "You know my hands . . ." He pointed with his right stump to some broad green leaves tucked into his turban. Panda Baba removed them, and selected the best of them. He pulled a long strip of sinew from the backbone of the leaf, and made it into a tiny ring. Then he tore off very carefully a strip from the bottom and rolled it into a small cylinder. Finally he rolled the leaf itself into a long thin pipe, slipped the little ring round it to hold it together, and the small cylinder inside to prevent the tobacco from slipping down too far.

"Oh ho!" laughed Julan very pleased. "You know the riddle: *He makes a belt out of his own sinew, he cuts off his own head, and shoves it into his stomach.* That's just what you've done."

"So it is," laughed Panda Baba equally pleased. He undid the upper part of his dhoti, and from the fold removed a little bag. From one side he took some tobacco, broke it into small pieces and rammed it into the pipe. From the other he removed a flint and steel with a little cotton. He placed the pipe in Julan's mouth, lit a small bit of cotton, and placed it in the pipe. Julan took a few hearty puffs, and it was alight. He leant back against the wall, content. Now he was ready for the news.

CHAPTER III

CLAY-SHUTTERED DOORS

"WHERE is that black Satan going?" asked Julan after a few more puffs, jerking his head towards the path along which Bhuta had departed. "He is always going up to the hill nowadays. Has he some fresh callet up there?"

"If he has, she is a ghost: no living woman will look at him. No, it's not that." He turned a face heavy with foreboding towards the leper. "I'm beginning to be afraid. I think he goes to the forest to talk with the old cobra who is lord of the underworld."

Julan moved uneasily. "You mean . . ."

"Yes. I think he's determined that Gamira shall die this year. He's never forgiven him for the thrashing he had of him. And now day after day I hear him making magic in his house; once I saw a bag hung from the roof which moved as if it were alive. There must have been snakes in it."

Julan shivered. "But you are a much more powerful *gunia* than he is?" he asked anxiously. "And he would hardly dare to ask the Baiga for help."

Panda Baba started. "And if he did, what good would that do him?" he asked ferociously. "Baigas

indeed ! " He was silent for a time, glaring down the street. " Baigas ! " he said again. " Shall I tell you all about this great Baiga wizard of ours, so clever that my own son goes to him. I heard the full story only yesterday."

This was the sort of thing Julan had been waiting for. " Yes, yes, go on," he said eagerly.

Panda Baba affected to hesitate. " It's really about his mother," he said.

" All the better," said Julan. " Get on with it. You needn't be shy of me."

" Well, his mother's name was Lattri and she and her mother lived alone. This Lattri is a proper little slut, and soon there's a child in her stomach, and no husband that anyone can see. So the mother gets a *lamsena*[1] boy, and keeps him in the house to work for them, and to save the girl's good name. But whenever he tries to go to her she gives him *gali* and turns him out of the room. After this has happened two or four times, he decides to run away. But the mother says : ' Wait one more night and we'll see what we can do.' She gets a dish of salt and chili, to put you know where. . . ."

Julan nodded. Certainly he knew where.

" And at night they both hide behind the wall and watch through a little hole. In the middle of the night along comes another man, and slips into bed with her. Then when they are fairly at it, in the two go and catch

[1] A *lamsena* is a boy who serves a number of years for a wife instead of paying the bride-price.

them. The *lamsena* boy gives the man a good hiding and turns him out, and when the girl sees the chili she screams 'I'll never see him again, and I'll always love you.' So after that, this Lattri, the mother of this great Baiga wizard of ours, begins to sleep with her *lamsena*. After a time the baby is born, but it soon dies, and after its death the mother has a wedding for them. Directly after the wedding the little hussy runs away with her Gond gallant. The *lamsena* kills himself by taking poison. The old mother goes from village to village searching for the girl, and her eyes break open from over-much weeping, and she dies also."

"The little drab!" exclaimed Julan with great severity.

"Oh, but that's not nearly all," went on Panda Baba, lowering his voice a little, as Hothu with two strapping Baiga girls went past, carrying baskets of roots on their heads. "That's not nearly all. After Lattri had lived with the Gond for a while, she got tired of him, and ran away with a Chamar. It was the beginning of the rains. The Gond followed them till he came to a wide river. They were on the far bank, but the river came down in flood, and the Gond was carried away and drowned. So the Chamar took his Baigin home. One day he brought cow's flesh and told the girl to cook it. She obeyed him, but when the time came to eat it, she refused. So the Chamar says: 'If you won't eat it, don't stay with me any longer, go away.' And he turns her out of the house into the jungle. There she meets a

jackal, and the jackal says: 'Auntie, why are you weeping? Has my uncle beaten you?' 'May he be burnt to ashes,' she cries. 'No, no,' says the jackal, 'I'll kill him instead.' So the girl is very pleased, and begins to live with the jackal. . . ."

"With a jackal?" asked Julan, not sure if he had heard correctly.

"With a jackal," repeated Panda Baba firmly. "The fact is well known. Ask anyone about here. But the jackal had a friend, a tiger, who also wanted this girl, and she was frightened, for the tiger was rather big, and so she ran away to a Baiga village near-by. A Baiga girl had just died there, and the heart-broken husband took Lattri on instead. But over her womb there were marks —the mark of a Gond, the mark of a Chamar and the mark of the jackal. The Gond's mark was like a hempen thread, and had a seed in it. The Chamar's mark was like the bone of a cow. The jackal had left the marks of its teeth. One day the Baiga undressed his girl in the day-time, and saw the marks and understood them. But he said nothing, only he thought to himself: 'If you have been to a Gond, and a Chamar and a jackal, one day you will deceive me also. So I won't love you too much.' Sure enough, after a time, this Lattri sees a young and handsome Baiga boy, and decides that she must have him. During the Karma Dance, she treads on his heel, and he understands by that sign—which all Baigas use—that she wants him. So next time the husband goes out to dig roots in the jungle, he goes to her house. He goes several times, and at last they run

away together. And it is their child who is the great wizard who comes to plague this village."

"And what happened to his parents?" asked Julan.

"After the child had grown up, his father went one day to cut trees for *bewar*.[1] But he was such a fool that he didn't even know how to make the proper offerings to the jungle-folk, and so a tiger came out and killed him. For two or three days Lattri watched the path for him, and at last someone came and told her what had happened. Then she went to the forest, and in the place where her lover had been killed she took poison and died."

"A very sad story," said Julan, shaking his head. At the same time he could not help feeling a good deal impressed. All that mysterious stuff about the marks over the womb; and if this Baiga's mother had really lived with a jackal, he probably knew something. Perhaps he had a cure for leprosy. He resolved to consult him directly he could get Panda Baba well out of the way.

"I hear," said Panda Baba, changing the subject abruptly, "that Tiblu is dying for love of Rannu's daughter. Have you seen anything of it?"

"Aye. Gamira and Phulmat often speak of it. But Rannu wags his tail in another direction. There is a rich man—you know him—Kuar Singh of Senguda, and the poor fool must have her marry his son. He thinks he'll get a little money that way. So he will, but not more than fifty or sixty rupees. Girls don't

[1] The shifting cultivation of the Baigas.

fetch more than that nowadays. But my mind is that she will refuse and run away with Tiblu. He's a good-looking youngster, and of a good family."

Panda Baba was half annoyed, half relieved at hearing this. His own son, Tok Singh, was also after Singaru, had moped about for the last two years, hiding in streams, trying to waylay the girl in the jungle. Panda Baba himself had always been against the match because Tigli, Singaru's mother, was his sister, and he belonged to that stricter school of thought among the Gonds which, while not actually forbidding, does not welcome, cousin-marriages. It nettled him, however, to think that the girl could prefer Tiblu to his own handsome son.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said a little sharply. "Besides, Putchi has other plans also. He has a sister in Benipat, and claims that her daughter should be given to his son, in order that the milk that they have given to Benipat may be brought back again. That is the law of *dhud-lautana*, but I don't think Tiblu cares much for such traditions."

"Nor does his father, unless there's money in them."

"Well," said Panda Baba a trifle sententiously, for after all he was the guardian of religion in Mulmula, and people had to be reminded of these things, "the matter is in the hands of god, and doubtless he——"

"God!" interrupted the leper suddenly. "Don't talk to me of god. I think nothing of the gods. Look at all this!" He flung out the stump of a hand towards the village. "Look at it—poverty, disease, the darkness

of ignorance. Like cattle we live, like cattle we die. The gods are impotent or dead."

" But at least Annadeo who provides for us——"

" Annadeo ! He is the worst of all. Once, indeed, he was fat and wealthy, and in the Age of Gold he gave grain five times its present size, but then slowly in this Age of Darkness in which we live, he grew thin and tired, until at last when the railway came, this noble God of Food ran away from us poor peasants, and took train to Bombay. And there, they say, he has grown fat himself, and makes everyone else fat also. And what is this Bara Deo of ours but a devil——"

" Be careful what you say," exclaimed Panda Baba, looking as if he expected to be struck by lightning at any moment.

" Why should I be careful ? What can he do, this prisoner of the saj tree ? Everybody knows where he came from. Mahadeo had created the four castes of the Hindus. One day Parvati was wandering in the jungle and she saw a girl staggering along under a heavy basketful of roots. She was almost naked, her buttocks could be seen. Parvati went to Mahadeo and said : ' I know the four that you have created, but who is this ? ' Mahadeo said : ' She is the eldest daughter of the sun.' Then said Parvati : ' If she is the eldest daughter of the sun, why is she so poor that I can see her buttocks ? ' Mahadeo replied : ' These matters are not for you ; go and get on with your cooking.' She flew into a rage, for Parvati could be shrewish at times. ' I wont cook a thing,' she screamed, ' till you tell me the whole story.

Why have you kept it a secret.' So then, of course, Mahadeo had to tell her. He explained that the woman was a Gond, and that in the old days the Gonds used to regard Mahadeo himself as their Bara Deo. But later on a Gond king called Bariya was born. This king was really a devil, and he said to all the Gonds : ' Why do you take this Mahadeo as your god ? I am the true Bara Deo.' And because he was a rich and powerful king, they all began to worship him through fear. But when he died they took him to a saj tree and buried him beneath it, and drove a nail into the tree so that his ghost shouldn't wander. Then ever since they have worshipped this prisoner of the saj tree, and have left the worship of Mahadeo. That is why we are poor to-day."

" I have heard the story," said Panda Baba, yawning a little ; he was interested in theology, but preferred it to be his own. " But I thought little of it. Yet who knows ? It is likely to be true. All the same I believe in the gods—but they are asleep. At least the good ones are. So beware lest you wake them with your evil tongue."

There was a movement behind them, and Satula stood on the threshold, a wicker basket in her hand. Satula was Julan's third wife—his first had died long ago, the second was now living with her parents and visited him very seldom, now that he was a leper. Satula was still young ; like Phulmat, she was light of colour, and beautiful with a delicate and gentle lustre. She wore a sari of green and mauve. By some happy chance, the great mill in Ahmedabad where it was made had turned

out a blend of colour that exactly suited her. But there was more than beauty in Satula. There was an air of chivalry about her : she was the guardian of her helpless husband : she had given everything for him, and would go on giving till death broke their companionship. She was less temperamental than Phulmat, more truly passionate ; less alluring, but more complete. Unlike Phulmat, who had great storms of tears and days of moodiness, she was always serene and happy ; her laugh was delightful and infectious ; there was a little break in her voice that made her words twice lovable. Daily she tended her husband, bathed him, fed him, dressed him, with an infinite patience and courage, never flinching as from month to month he literally rotted under her hands. Two years ago, discoloured patches had begun to appear on her own skin, and she understood that she also was a leper. But that had made very little difference to her ; she was not very imaginative, did not realize all that might come to her one day ; her serenity was unbroken. In any case, if disease had come in the service of her raja, she was content.

She smiled at the two men, and went down the street to collect the cow-dung from the clearing where the cows had rested that midday.

" She is my hands and feet," said Julan soberly. " That is all the god I worship."

Panda Baba nodded. His own wife was a great trial to him, a woman of unending conversation and almost unlimited capacity for jealousy. " Where is Gamira ? " he asked, preferring some other theme. Even as he

spoke there was a snatch of song on the wind, and Gamira and Phulmat appeared at the top of the road. They were bringing wood from the forest.

O the fisherman's daughter, they sang.

The fisherman's daughter is a very pretty girl.
She has a big net—she might catch anyone.
And pop him into her fish-basket.

They reached the house, a pair of lovers still, entirely happy, absorbed in one another. They stopped in front of the two old men, and swinging their axes to and fro, continued the song, the loads of wood balanced on their heads :

O the weaver's daughter is a very pretty girl.
She might spin anyone into a thread,
And weave him into her sari.

O the Pardhan's daughter is a very pretty girl.
She has a bow and arrow ; she might shoot anyone,
And carry him home for supper.

As they sang the last words, they burst into shouts of laughter, and went into the house, Phulmat winking outrageously at Panda Baba as she passed. The shadow of Bhuta's snake-magic had not yet fallen on them ; they mocked at such foolish superstition. They stooped to go under the low roof, and threw down their bundles of wood in a corner of the courtyard. When that was

done, they stretched themselves lazily on the ground which was clean and white with the mountain mud.

"Come, let's go in," said Julan, and with Panda Baba's help, he crawled into the court and sat down on a little raised platform to one side. As he did so, Satula returned, her basket now full of smoking cow-dung. She went into the house, and in a few moments brought out a large flat earthen pot filled with ashes and dust, on top of which was a thin layer of glowing coals. She put it in front of Julan and everyone crowded round it.

"Have you any cure for the pox that plagues me?" asked Gamira presently, turning towards Panda Baba.

"Of course he has," exclaimed Phulmat. "Our *gunia* knows everything. Give him a bottle of wine, and he'll soon find out what evil spirit is troubling you."

"It is not a matter to laugh about," Julan reproved her. "But in any case the sex disease does not come from evil spirits or witches, but out of our own bodies."

"Yes," said Panda Baba authoritatively. "You can get it by walking over the place where someone has urinated. But witches also can send it. In Ajwainbar there was a witch who put a *bhut* (spirit) in the stone on the bank of the lake where people went to wash. She said to the stone : 'O Samduria Deo who livest in this stone, even if the women of thirty-six families come here to wash their saris, attack the sex of every one of them. And so it happened."

"When I was a young man," said Julan, "I went one day to Kisli-Belwani for a funeral. I got very drunk

and cursed my mother's elder sister, an ugly old hag, her breasts paggling to the waist. She got very angry, and said : ' You whoreson dog, I'll see you going, but I'll not see you coming back.' I was young and thought little of it, and went off home with a light heart. I had gone a few miles—I was by the river—when suddenly I swelled up to an immense size." He held out his hands to show how big he had grown. " I was all alone. I sat on the bank of the river all night weeping. I couldn't move. At last I crawled home, and went to the *gunia* of our village. He said to me : ' Have you cursed anyone ? ' When I told him, he abused me for being such a fool, and told me to bring a pig and some wine. He drank the wine and we ate the pig, and after eight days I got all right."

Panda Baba had been a little fidgety during this story, and now he said importantly : " You see, you must understand about your bodies. Where does the life live ? " he asked Phulmat, confident that she didn't know.

" Who knows ? " said she, spreading her hands to the fire. A little *mungwari* (mouse-deer) came running out of the kitchen. Julan was passionately fond of animals and could tame even the wildest creatures of the jungle. She caught it up into her lap and began to fondle it.

" The life," went on Panda Baba, " is in the hollow above the stomach which sometimes goes *put-put*. A man's life is like a little fire-fly, only you can't see it. Disease drives it up and up, towards the throat and mouth, until it drives it out of the body altogether."

"And the stomach?" asked Gamira lazily. He was feeling just a little bored.

"In the stomach there are thousands of little worms, and when food goes there they burn it to ashes and throw it out. There is a sort of sieve there, and two store-rooms. Water is put in one, the food in the other. The food is above, water is below. The water is turned yellow by the heat of the burning food."

Phulmat began a quiet exploration of Gamira's thick dark hair, for her lover's head, like that of many Gonds, was somewhat entomophilous. They were neither of them greatly interested in the medical gossip of the old men.

A group of girls, bringing water from the well, went by the door. Gamira was never far from song, and this gave him his cue. He looked at Phulmat, and began *O water-girl.*

O water-girl! with tinkling anklets
That sounded under the dark mango tree.
O water-girl! your pot of bronze
Is shining in the setting sun.
Your lips are dry and thirsty as my heart.
O water-girl! with swaying hips
Go to bring water from the lonely well.
Fear not the dark, I'll go with you,
My heart is thirsty, water-girl!

Hearing the singing, a small, well-formed, neatly dressed little man looked in. It was the Panjabi money-

lender and merchant who lived beyond Bhuta's house on the outskirts of the village. He had a pointed black beard, and an alert, perpetually smiling face, but it was a dangerous smile and the alertness promised trouble. He came from the north, from a country more distant than most distant Delhi ; he had come to make money, but he had grown poorer. They were all pleased at that. They looked at him now without friendliness, without hostility, but they stopped singing. Sometimes it was useful to be able to borrow a few rupees from him. Only Putchi and Rannu were heavily in his debt. But no one asked him to sit down, and after a few slightly embarrassed civilities, he went on down the road.

Panda Baba took a deep breath and seemed about to say something, when suddenly, with screams of delight, Nanas and Jiggeri, both stark naked, covered with ash like sadhus and carrying in their hands small sticks gorgeous with peacock's feathers, came dancing into the middle of the court and began, at first with great solemnity, to imitate a *gunia* doing his magic. They wagged their heads to and fro, quivered from head to foot, panted and gasped for breath, their limbs twitched spasmodically. But they could not keep it up for long. Jiggeri covered her mouth with her hands, trying not to laugh, but it was too much for her, and after a moment or two she ran to her mother and buried her face in her sari. Nanas with a final convulsion jumped to his feet and ran indoors in search of clothes.

The names Nanas and Jiggeri both mean " tiny," and had been given to the children for opposite reasons, to

Nanas because he was strongly built and handsome and would be Mokasi one day in Julan's place, and Satula thought that by calling him *nanas*, or small, she would deceive the evil spirits as to his true value. But Jiggeri really was tiny, with a solemn little face and a round belly puffed out with an enormous spleen. Jiggeri was already at the age of eight, a hard worker about the house, gathered cow-dung, drove out the bullocks to pasture, helped her mother with the cooking. But Nanas was mischievous and lazy. He preferred dancing and playing marbles with smooth white stones.

Presently he was out again. He ran to Phulmat and flung himself full length upon her.

"Be careful, boy," said Panda Baba to Gamira, "or you'll find yourself cuckolded."

Gamira laughed coarsely. "Come, you rascal," he said. "Leave my girl alone." And he pulled the child towards him to lie across his chest.

"Now ask me a riddle," demanded Gamira.

"I heard a very good one to-day. The Baiga boy told me." He puckered up his face in the effort of recollection. "*There is only one grain of rice, but the whole house is filled with the husks of it.* What is that?"

"How should I know such girl's talk?" parried Gamira, baffled.

"Well, I don't know either," confessed Phulmat. Panda Baba said nothing, but did his best to look as if he knew, but preferred to give the younger people a chance.

"It's a lighted lamp in a dark house, of course," came a voice from the door. Tiblu, the headman's son, was

standing there. Tiblu was about nineteen years old, very dark, with a pleasant open face and curly hair. Round his bronze-dark throat was a garland of vivid red beads ; there was a flower tucked over his right ear ; on his head was a pink turban. He looked the perfect gallant, but in fact he was shy and timid to a fault. This was partly due to his disastrous domestic adventures, when, anxious to imitate his father, he had tried to keep two girls at once, though he refused officially to marry either of them. He was only seventeen when he did that, and his heart was not in it, for from childhood he had loved Singaru. So he was unable to satisfy either of his girls, and after some stormy months they ran away together. " One sword does not need two sheaths," he used to say regretfully. Now he could not make up his mind, could not nerve himself to capture Singaru even, and Tok Singh, his greatest friend, made high profit from his indecision.

" Ah, but you heard the Baiga boy tell me that," shouted Nanas, picking up a stick and poking the little *mungwari* out of Phulmat's lap. The tiny deer, with its startled shining eyes, gave a frightened squeak and bolted back into the kitchen. Instantly Julan was aflame with rage. The least injury to his beloved pets exasperated him beyond measure.

" A pox on you, you worthless drumbling clown," he roared. " Oh, if only I were a man, there wouldn't be a shoe, or a stick, or an axe in the whole house that hadn't been used to beat you. Come here, you little bastard, come here."

Nanas, frightened out of his wits, jumped away from the fire, and followed the *mungwari* into the kitchen, where he took refuge behind his mother. She, as always, took the boy's part.

"Who are you calling a bastard, you huff-snuff swaggering lozel," she screamed. "Leave the boy alone, or not a single *durree* do you get for supper."

Julan was silenced instantly, for he knew this was no idle threat. "The woman looks on the brat as if he were a god," he grumbled.

"It is always so with the women," Panda Baba consoled him. "The child is the *devata*, the godling of the house. My own mother treated me in that way—and it has done me little harm."

Julan glared at him, was on the point of caustic comment, when Phulmat stood up and cried: "Do tell us a story till supper is ready."

"And there is a good supper," Satula reminded them from the door of her kitchen. Having gained her point she wanted to mollify her husband; she could not bear to see him unhappy, and nothing made him more unhappy than to be angry with her or the children. "There is a good supper, and it is only cock-shut time. Tell them how the world began, Pandaji."

"Yes, yes," cried Phulmat. "There is plenty of time, and when you tell your stories there are no troubles left in the world. Come here, Nanas, you rascal, and touch your father's feet, and say you're sorry."

Timidly the boy came out and touched his father's feet, but immediately jumped back out of reach like a

startled deer. "Now all is well," urged Phulmat, nudging Panda Baba with her elbow. "There's plenty of time."

How could he resist her? She talked with her whole body. "Very well," he said, "I'll tell you how the world began and the first men were made."

"Nothing could be better," said Julan in deep tones of approval. "Tiblu, go and call the neighbours. Call Rannu's house at least."

Phulmat went into the kitchen and brought out a pile of green leaves. She sat down by the fire, and began to stitch these into plates for the evening meal, fixing them together with little slips of bamboo. Gamira lay flat on his back and gazed up into the evening sky. Panda Baba cleared his throat once or twice, stretched out his hands above the fire, and began.

CHAPTER IV

ANCIENT HEAVENS

"At first there was nothing but water, water, water. There was no voice of God, no voice of *bhut*, no wind, no rocks, no paths. As the sky is now, so was water then. God sat on a great lotus-leaf, drifting here and there on the waters. There was no fruit or flower to his life, he was all alone, like a house where a girl has died. So one day God began to rub his arm and a lot of dirt came off. He looked at the dirt, and he kneaded it a little, and moulded it a little, and at last made Karicag the Crow. When he saw it could fly he said to it: 'Go and find some earth for me; I am lonely here; I want to make a world.'"

There was a stir at the door. Old Rannu came in, lurching along with pathetic, fantastic movements, and Tigli waddled in behind him. Nanas began to giggle, as he always did when he saw Rannu, and Phulmat hastily covered his face with her hand. Behind Rannu was Singaru. She went straight to sit by Phulmat. Then came Tiblu, a little timid, and Tok Singh, assured, and sat where they could watch Singaru's face. At sight of them, Phulmat pinched her friend's arm, and she shyly covered her face and head with her sari. Last of

all came an unexpected visitor. The old Baiga had arrived in the village that afternoon, and had been welcomed with a bottle of liquor. Warmed by this, he had summoned up courage to enter right into the enemy's camp, and had decided to hear Panda Baba's story, and if necessary correct it. He was a fine figure of a man, with piercing bright eyes, long white hair falling on either side of his head, almost naked save for a little loin-cloth. Panda Baba glared at him, but Julan, remembering the jackal, gave him a warm welcome, and offered him a seat in the inner circle by the fire.

" The Crow flew and flew and flew," continued Panda Baba a little severely ; " who knows where it went. At last the breath left its body and it fell with a thud onto Chakramal Chatri, the great Tortoise who was sitting in the water with one hand raised to the sky. So Chakramal Chatri said : ' O Crow, what is the matter ? Why are you gasping like this ? ' ' O my elder brother, I was so tired that my life was leaving me.' ' Where are you going, little brother ? ' ' I am searching for the earth : where can I find it ? ' ' You must go to the Worm at the bottom of the ocean, for he has swallowed the whole world.' So the Crow took Chakramal Chatri with him, and they flew away, away, away to the Twelve Blacksmiths and the Thirteen Coppersmiths. These made a great iron cage with windows. The Crow and the Tortoise got into the cage, and they were let down through the water to the bed of the great ocean where the Worm was. When they got to the bottom they opened the window and got out. The brothers who

were up above them lowered a chain down to the Crow and said : ' When you're ready, give it a tug and we'll pull you up.'

" The Worm was sound asleep, but when it heard them it woke up and was very angry. ' I've slept for twelve years and now you've broken my sleep. I've had no food all that time—so now I'll eat you.' Chakramal Chatri got behind the Crow when it said this. ' Whose daughter are you ? ' asked the Worm.

" ' I am the daughter of the Great God.'

" ' Why have you come down here ? '

" ' I've come to find the earth.'

" ' Did your father put the earth here that you should come to me to look for it ? '

" When she heard that *gali*, the Crow got angry and said : ' If you will give me the earth peacefully, well and good ; but if not I will beat you.'

" That made the Worm frightened, so it said : ' The earth isn't here, my daughter ; it's over there, but it's guarded by a great giant who will burn you to ashes if you go near him.' But the Crow didn't believe this, and when Chakramal Chatri saw that the Worm was frightened, it forgot to be frightened itself, and caught it by the neck.

" ' Give us the earth at once,' it said, ' or I'll cut off your head.' So said Chakramal Chatri.

" And he began to squeeze and squeeze and squeeze. ' My son, my son, wait, wait,' cried the Worm, and it began to vomit.

" Twenty-one times it vomited—each time it brought

up some earth, just the size of a berry each time. First of all it vomited Mother Earth, then the Sandy Earth, then the Red Earth, then the Black Earth. After that it brought up the Sinful Earth, where alone a tiger can catch you, the Desert Earth, where you sow and get nothing for your labour, Filthy Earth for dung, Virgin Earth, Earth burnt by forest fires, White Earth where all is gained, and—and——"

"Sacred Earth where land is justly measured," put in Tiblu, seeing the old man's memory was failing.

"Yes, yes, of course, Sacred Earth and Golden Earth and Silver Earth, and—I forget the others. It doesn't matter. The Worm gave them all to the Crow, and she pulled at the chain and they were drawn up to the surface of the ocean. The Crow tied the earth round its neck and flew and flew and flew till it nearly died, but at last it came to the Great God.

"'Have you brought it, my daughter?'

"'Yes, father, I have.'

"Then the Great God undid the earth from the Crow's neck and put it in his lap. When the Crow had rested, the Great God gave her the earth and told her to sow it in the water. So she flew here and there, dropping the bits of earth as if they were seed. After a few days the land began to grow. There was some here and some there. But it was not firm: whenever they tried to stand on it, it ran away. At last the Great God sent the Crow to fetch Bhimsen and Pawan Dassorie the Wind. The Wind came first, flying in great haste. He blew on the earth, he drove some of it up into the air, he mixed it all

up, he blew till it began to be hard and firm. But the Wind is a blind god, as you know, that's why he's always knocking things over and banging up against people. So the work was not perfect ; the earth was hard, but when they stood on one side the other side tipped up.

" Then at last came Bhimsen, the great giant, staggering along under a load of rocks. He was very tired, and he told the Great God that he must first of all have some food. They gave him twenty-five sacks of rice and twelve sacks of dal. He ate it all and said : ' This is nothing ; give me some more.' Then they gave him twelve sacks of gram. When he had eaten that he said to the Great God : ' Old uncle, you've given me nothing to drink.' ' You must go and find some wine,' said the Great God. ' What is that ? ' asked Bhimsen. ' Go and see,' said the Great God.

" Bhimsen went to the forest and searched and searched. After a time he came to a mahua tree. The tree was hollow and the hole was full of wine. All round were sitting birds who had been drinking it—green pigeon, blue pigeon, parrots, crows, maina, every kind of bird. They were nodding their heads. ' Why are they nodding their heads like that ? ' asked Bhimsen. He climbed the tree to see, and there the hollow was full of wine. Bhimsen dipped his hand in it and sucked it. ' This is wine ! This is wine ! ' he shouted, and began to drink. When he had had enough, his head began to nod also. He sat down with the birds and they all nodded their heads together.

"Then he filled twelve gourds full of the wine, and went back to the Great God."

Panda Baba was now possessed with his story. He sat forward, his eyes sparkling with pleasure, his hands spread to the bright fire, the sibilant, expressive Chattisgarhi flowed from his lips like a stream in flood. They were all silent, loving the story, but even more absorbed by the old man's pleasure in it.

"So then when Bhimsen had given the Great God some of the wine to drink, and the Crow and Pawan Dassorie the Wind had their share, he went all round the earth. Where it was thin he put a mountain, where it was too heavy he made a valley. Where it slipped about he put trees to hold it together. At last the world was firm and steady. He made his body ninety-six miles long, and stood up to look everywhere and see that it was finished. And then——"

And then there was an interruption. The old Baiga suddenly threw away his pipe and said loudly and violently: "It's not true. Bhimsen could do nothing. It was Nanga Baiga and Nangin Baigin who fixed the earth in its place."

Panda Baba gasped. He had never been contradicted before. He had no idea what to do. He sat staring, the whole company sat staring, at the Baiga. And before anyone could speak, the Baiga had released a torrent of eager, excited words. It was his chance, and he meant to take it. No one could stop him.

"Listen, listen," he cried. "This is what really happened. On the north side of the world there was a

mountain, the Hill of Elephants. There Nanga Baiga and Nangin Baigin were born, out of the womb of Mother Earth. At first they lived in an ant-hill. There was a lake near-by, and one day Nanga Baiga went to bathe there. The girl also went to bathe, and so they met. Nanga Baiga said to the girl : ' If you are ready, I'll have you.' She replied : ' If you have a mind to it, I'm ready.' So the two became one there on the bank of the lake. Then they lived in a hollow saj tree.

" When the Great God found that Bhimsen couldn't fix the earth in its place, he sent him to fetch Nanga Baiga and Nangin Baigin. But they refused to come. Then he sent Pawan Dassorie the Wind. Still they wouldn't come. Then he sent a Brahmin. Nanga Baiga said : ' Come and share my food, and I'll come with you.' But the Brahmin ran away. Then the Great God sent a Kshattriya, a Bania and a Sudra, and they all fell at Nanga Baiga's feet, but to everyone he said : ' Come and share my food.' But none of them would do that, and they went away without him. At last came a Gond, younger brother of the Baigas, and he shared Nanga Baiga's food——"

This was too much. " It is impossible," said Panda Baba and Rannu together. " No Gond has ever eaten from the hands of a Baiga."

" In the old days they did so," replied the old man calmly. " It is only in this Age of Darkness that the Gonds have forgotten that they are our younger brothers. Then Nanga Baiga said : ' Look, we are naked as cows—my wife is hiding herself with her hands ; how are

we to come and meet the gods?' So the Gond sent Bhimsen to fetch some cloth. He brought so little that there was only enough for a small loin-cloth for Nanga Baiga, and a little strip to go round his wife's waist. Underneath she was naked. Mother Earth looked up and saw her, and said: 'You must always dress like that.'

"Then they got four great nails, and came to the place where the gods were. Nangin Baigin made herself naked and drove the nails into each of the four corners of the earth, and it became steady. Nanga Baiga cut a bamboo and sharpened it, and from the shavings came all the tribes of the world. Then the two Baigas, being weary, lay down, the man in one corner of the world, the girl in the other. Their feet met in the middle.

"But now the Great God called all the tribes together to make a king over them. The others all came in fine clothes, but Nanga Baiga came clad in leaves and with an axe over his shoulder. The Great God took him by the hand and said: 'You are to be the king over the whole world.' But the Baiga said: 'No, make the Gond king, for he is my brother.' Then the Great God gave the Baigas this blessing: 'All the kingdoms of the world may fall to pieces, but he who is made of earth and is lord of the earth shall never forsake it. You will make your living from the earth. You will cut wood and carry it on your shoulders. You will dig roots and eat them. But you will never become rich, for if you did you would forsake the earth, and then there would be no one to keep the nails in their place.'"

The company had been a little restless while the old man described the dignity of the Baigas, but they were pleased when he admitted that the Gonds were the kings of the earth. Even Panda Baba spoke in an almost courteous fashion. "Who knows," he said, "if these things are true? But it is certain that the Gonds are kings and that the Baigas are always poor."

"And the Pardhans?" asked Julan in his deep voice, passing his pipe to Gamira.

"This is what happened," said Panda Baba hastily, before the Baiga could start again. "All the tribes of men were born from the stomach of Rawan, except the Baigas who were there already. Rawan had no wife. Man was born of man. When the life had quickened in his belly, then the children inside said: 'How are we to come out? If we come through your mouth, they will say you have vomited us out. If we come through your eyes, we will be your tears. If we come through your nose, they will say you have blown your nose. If we come——"

Tigli interrupted him. "Stop your bawdy talk," she said. "Aren't you ashamed in front of these girls?"

"Who's talking bawdy?" asked Panda Baba annoyed. "What I was saying was that in the end Rawan's belly burst open, and the thirty-six families of mankind came out. First came the Gonds. Then came the Brahmins and Chamars together. Then came the Mussalmans and the English together. And all the other tribes. At last Rawan washed all their bottoms, and out of the mess he made the Pankas."

There were shouts of laughter, for Pankas were not popular in Mulmula.

" Then the Great God went to the bazaar and opened a shop. Everyone came to buy from him. To the Gonds he gave a plough. To the Brahmins he gave a pen, to the Kalars a bottle, to the merchants a pair of scales, to the fishermen a fishing-net, to the Mahars a loom, until he had given their work to everyone in the world."

" But what about the Pardhans ? " said Julan again. " You have said nothing about the Pardhans. I will have to tell you myself."

A delicious smell of cooking came from the kitchen. " How long before supper is ready ? " shouted Julan.

Satula came to the door. " You have time for one more pipe. If Phulmat will help me, it will soon be ready."

Julan suddenly realized that on this special day, with some delicious tender sambhur flesh to eat, Phulmat had been sitting idle listening to stories. " Why haven't you been cooking ? " he roared. " Get up, you idle little slut, you bitch, and go and see to it."

" You are the child and father of a bitch yourself," she said, tossing her head, but breaking into a smile in spite of herself—she was always delighted when Julan gave her *gali*.

" Never mind what I am," he retorted. " Go and get dinner ready."

" All right, all right, I'm going," she answered, getting up as slowly as possible to annoy him.

"Do tell us the story," said Gamira hastily to distract his attention. Julan was flattered; Gamira usually tried to stop him telling his stories. He permitted his attention to be diverted.

"This is what the elders of my village used to say," he began. "Who knows if it is true?"

"Who knows?" they all said solemnly, pulling at their pipes.

"One day the seven Gond brothers went to a river to fish. They drained out the water, and there was a deep hole, as deep as the height of two men. They got many fish and climbed up on to the bank. But the wife of the youngest brother went down into the hole and tried to get more fish, and there her hands stuck in the mud. Two or three of the brothers went down to help her, but they couldn't get her out. Then they went home, but the husband, the younger brother, sat with her all night long. He was very tired, and fell asleep. As he slept he saw in a dream the God Bariya coming to him, and saying: 'I am the god whom you have forgotten.' In the morning he found his wife's hands were tied by huge iron chains. That chain was the God Bariya. They took the chain home, put it in a corner of the house, and forgot all about it. Then after a few days the God came again in a dream, and said to the youngest brother: 'Go and cut a kumher tree. You must fell it with a single stroke of your axe. You mustn't let it fall on the ground, but you must catch it in the air.'

"The next morning the youngest brother went out, and found a small kumher tree and easily felled it with a

single blow. He went and put it underneath a saj. The next night three of the brothers had the same dream. Bariya Deo came to them and said : 'The boy whose wife was caught in the stream—he will be my servant. Keep him for me.' So the next day the three eldest brothers took the youngest brother to the saj tree, but the kumher was no longer there. But a voice came from the saj. It told the youngest brother and his wife to hold out a new cloth. They did so, and suddenly a *kingri*[1] fell of its own accord out of the tree on to the cloth. The voice came again saying : 'From now on you are to worship me with your *kingri*, and your brothers will feed you when you play to them and ask for alms in the name of Raita and Bariya.' The youngest brother picked up the *kingri* : he had never seen one before : but he began to play at once and they all danced to it. But then came this age of iron and darkness, and the minds of men rotted away so that they could see nothing clearly, and the brothers told the youngest that since he had taken to the practice of music which then was honoured but now is scorned, they would no longer take the common pipe from his hands or eat his food. From that younger brother came the Pardhans, the cleverest and best of all the Gonds. He brought his tale to an abrupt end. "Isn't supper ready yet ?" he shouted.

"In one moment," answered Phulmat from the kitchen.

"Then we must go," said Panda Baba, getting up. "We have all had great pleasure here to-day." Singaru

[1] A sort of fiddle.

also rose and began to help her father from the house. Tiblu stood in the shadows watching her. A great wave of love for her passed over him. How different she was from the others, especially in this, that she never hunted you as other women hunted, but lived a life secure within herself. She did not want him, did not need him, but if he could once win her, she would give him everything.

It was dark now and a little chilly. Phulmat came out of the kitchen and went into her own house to put away, in the usual hiding-place, one of her silver *tora*[1] that was hurting her ankle. Suddenly she ran out into the court and clutched Gamira by the arm.

"My *dhar*," she gasped. "Have you taken them?"

"No," he replied. "Aren't they there?"

"They are gone," she cried. "Who could have known the secret hiding-place? Who could have taken them?"

"What is that, what is that?" Panda Baba was back in the house, his lithe body possessed with curiosity.

"My *dhar* have been removed from their hiding-place in the house, and I want to know who has done it," said Phulmat.

"It is magic," said Panda Baba loudly and authoritatively. "None but the spirits know these places, and in this village there is only——"

"It is Bhuta," shouted Tiblu excitedly. "It must be Bhuta. Let's go and give him another beating."

[1] *Tora* are brass or silver anklets, often heavy, sometimes decorated with bells. The *dhar* is a silver ear-ornament, in shape like a round shield, with little silver chains hanging from it.

"No, no, no," said Panda more quietly. "That would never do. We must wait and search carefully, for fear that we bring his curse on us. In the meantime, I will seek knowledge of the matter from the spirits."

Gamira was greatly disturbed, though Phulmat seemed less troubled than might have been expected. But Gamira was tired and anxious. Everything was going wrong this year—the bite at the snake dance, a failure of the crops, and now this loss.

"Shall we go to the police?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Julan. "And have them living here for a month at our expense, beating us and poking their noses into all our affairs, robbing us themselves at every turn. They are the greatest thieves in this district, so how are we to get help from them?"

There was a loud aggressive shouting outside. In came Dariya the Panka, the village watchman, his umbrella waved commandingly before him. They all looked at him with dislike and a little fear. What a jackal he was! thought Julan. Made of the dirt from all the bottoms of the world. A very good story. It was wise of Government to take all their watchmen from among the Pankas; no one else would do such dirty work. Sent running on any errand by every official that came along! Get a woman for the Tehsildar's butler, bring a cock for the Revenue Inspector, find a bundle of hay for the Sub-Inspector's horse. Julan spat at a wasp. Better be a sweeper, he thought, and spend your life clearing dung, than go on all those filthy messages. Afraid to go out after dark, he was. But

then he was afraid of everyone and everything ; his life was one long trepidation.

Dariya was frightened now, though he tried not to show it. He was a small thin man with a top-heavy head, and a straggling weak moustache ; Dariya the long-footed, an excellent name for him. He had come on official business, that was evident, for he was carrying his umbrella. It was a very distinguished umbrella, not valuable but different. Some of the spokes were missing, and it could only be kept open by an ingenious arrangement whereby a bit of stick was thrust through a hole bored in the rod to keep the thing in place. But its chief glory was a large red patch on the left side, which distinguished it from all the other umbrellas of the district—from the postmaster's which had his name cut on the handle, from the police umbrella and from the Deputy Ranger's, which was a new one, bought, they said, out of a bribe given by Bhuta when he had been caught stealing wood. It was Dariya's chief, perhaps his only, distinction, and he waved it before him now to give him confidence.

" The police sahib has come," he said loudly, " and the men of this village are to go to-morrow morning to work in his camp. But now I must have a chicken and some vegetables, and six eggs and a pot of milk and half a pot of *ghee*."

" And at what rate will the police lord pay for these things ? " asked Julan sarcastically.

" It is an honour for you to make offerings to the police. It proves your loyalty to Government. Talk

not of rates. Come, Gamira, get up and give me some vegetables."

Tired as he was, Gamira got up to go to the enclosure behind the house where a few struggling plants gave a scanty crop. The others sat still. The watchman hesitated, then turned to Panda Baba and said with great politeness, for even a servant of Government may be destroyed by a *gunia*'s curse : " Excuse me, Pandaji, but the police have called everyone, and if you don't want to go to-morrow you had better give me the fat chicken from your house. Then I will say that you had fever and couldn't come."

Panda Baba suddenly burst into a rage. " Get out of this house, you impotent Panka," he shouted. " Know that Panda Baba goes here and there at no man's bidding. Sit down, Gamira. Not a thing shall go from this village, and if a single man goes to-morrow I will put a curse on him. Go and tell the police to find our stolen *dhar* ; that is their duty ; not to trouble hard-worked peasants for their comforts."

Dariya slipped out of the house without a word, but presently they heard him down the street trying to bully Hothu's wife. She, a poor Baigin, might be trusted to submit.

CHAPTER V

WINDOW'D RAGGEDNESS

TUTTA sat outside his hut, a wide grin on his face, watching five dogs pursue a bitch. Round and round the hut went the little procession. The bitch kept well ahead : the dogs followed in line, their ears erect, tails up, feet lifted high, mouths open in a fixed and sickly grin. Tutta liked that. His powers of reflection were not great, but he knew that just so the bitch Fortune was chased by everyone, and everyone looked just as foolish as those dogs. But not him.

Tutta's hut was a little hovel near Panda Baba's house. The walls were of straw, a little mud dashed on them here and there. On cold nights the wind came through. The roof was carelessly thatched and leaky in the rains. Inside, the hut was filthy dirty ; a few rags and some dry grass heaped in a corner made a bed, and there was one brass pot. There were no other possessions whatever.

Tutta was an epileptic, helplessly maimed. He had a small head, a round face, his cheeks bulged a little under the eyes, his mouth was weak, pathetic ; he was very dark. He was naked save for a tattered loin-cloth. Round his neck was a charm to prevent Mirgi Devi throwing him down in his fits. His right arm hung limp by his side,

and the hand curled round under it. His left hand was a claw of four bent fingers, raw and red from a terrible burn he had suffered a year before.

Tutta had been born in a famine year, and on the day of his birth, so they said, an owl had sat on the roof of his father's house. His father had tried to drive it away by throwing sticks at it, and the owl had gone indeed, but with one of the sticks in its mouth. This it took to the nearest stream and dipped in the water, then put it in the hot sun to dry. As the stick dried in the sun, so did little Tutta's right hand wither away, and from childhood he was troubled by the fits which marked him out from all his fellows. Both the parents died while he was still a boy, and he was their only child. After his parents' death, Tutta wandered from place to place, begging a little, working a little, sometimes getting a few pice or some *kodon* for watching the crops at night or because people liked his singing. Singing was his greatest joy. When the pounding of the drums sounded in the night, he became a new man. He walked into the group of singers with conscious dignity, with the assurance of an artist.

People liked him for his poetry and his queer sayings. He talked very slowly, with long pauses between the sentences. The sun and the moon, he said once, are the twin swans that swim across the ocean of the sky. Thunder is the noise of the waves that sweep across that ocean. The marks on the moon are tattoo-marks. Shooting-stars are stars coming down to graze. And one day, he described how he had watched a rainbow

rise up out of the earth, out of a great ant-hill, at the foot of which lived the old cobra who is king of the underworld. Those ants were weavers, he said, of the Mehra caste, and all day long they were weaving the coloured sari that was flung across the sky by the old cobra's magic.

Then tragedy touched him with her fiery hand. He was sitting by the fire, warming himself, puffing vacantly at his pipe. He was alone. Suddenly his fit came on him ; he struggled to his feet ; then fell headlong beside the fire, and his left hand lay among the coals.

When he recovered consciousness, he found his hand charred and blackened. The villagers put wet mud on it, and one of them tied it up with an old rag. In time the pain grew less, but there was no healing. Soon the hand was rotten, stinking. He became an object of horror : no one could come near him. At last the headman took him to the nearest dispensary. It was a very small affair, and the compounder in charge of it could do nothing. But he gave Tutta the money to go to Bilaspur, a large town with a proper hospital, and sent a man with him.

Tutta walked the thirty miles to the railway station without food. He had to go quickly. They got on the train and reached Bilaspur. That day Mahatma Gandhi was in the town. Tutta was astonished and afraid of the vast crowds of people, but he gazed with awe on the little old man who seemed to know and embody all the sorrows of the poor.

At last they reached the hospital. The white-coated doctor frightened him, but there was a nurse there who

was unlike any woman he had ever seen, her eyes dark and tender, her face compassionate, her fingers deft and gentle. The doctor looked at the hand.

"How long ago did this happen?" he asked.

"A full month."

He nodded grimly. "You see, nurse, it is rotten through and through. Gangrene. And he is undernourished, and by the look of him an epileptic. It'll be a miracle if he pulls through. The whole arm will have to come off. Dress the wound now, and to-morrow we'll amputate."

But in the morning, when the doctor came to the operating theatre, the nurse's face was troubled. "He says, doctor, that we may as well kill him as take away his arm. He has no relatives, and he will be utterly helpless. Who is going to feed him, and keep him alive? Don't you think you could possibly save it?"

"Impossible, nurse, I'm afraid. But we'll have another look."

He made a second examination. The hand was cleaner now. "It is a great risk," he murmured. He looked into the boy's frightened eyes. "That finger will have to go, but I don't know—yes—we'll try. We'll take off that finger, and see if we can clear up the rest. But it'll be a big long job for you afterwards, nurse, and we're shorthanded enough as it is."

"Never mind that, he's rather a dear," she said, and smiled at him. Tutta's answering grin decided them. They would save his hand and arm.

Two months later, Tutta was walking to the station,

money in his pocket, better fed than he had ever been in all his life, and his hand and arm in a clean white sling. The booking-clerk took the money out of Tutta's pocket, helped himself to three annas above the fare, and gave back the change with a ticket. Tutta went and sat on the platform. "You must go by the next train," said the ticket-collector.

But Tutta, sitting in the sun, fell sound asleep. There was a roar like thunder, a great clattering and shouting, and there was the train panting like a mighty monster in front of him. Tutta scrambled to his feet bewildered, and began to walk slowly towards the carriages. Suddenly the train started to move. Tutta stopped and watched, astonished. Slowly the train drew out of the station. Tutta broke into a run. But now the train was running also, roaring impatiently like a hungry leopard. Soon it was out of sight, and nothing left but a distant rumble and a trail of smoke. But Tutta ran on. He must catch the train, however far he went. The sun beat upon him, sweat rolled down his face, but he persevered, shambling along the rough path beside the rails.

He ran five miles, and came to a station, a much smaller one this time ; not a soul to be seen. Surely the train must be here ? But no, it had gone. Or had it ? Behind him, there was a deep rumbling, and in a glory of smoke and fury the Mail thundered by. So somehow it had got behind him, and he had not noticed : it was playing with him, as a cat plays with a mouse, or a girl with her lover, running on ahead, doubling on its tracks,

luring him onward. Tutta came to another station. Utterly exhausted, he threw himself down on the platform and went to sleep. It was dark when he awoke, but there was a moon, and in the light of it he could see a Goods train wearily pulling its way along. So it had got tired at last ; it was going very slowly now ; Tutta felt a thrill of hope and pride ; it was not so easy to outwit him ; after all, he had a ticket, costing one rupee, three annas, nine pies in his pocket, and that gave him some right. He got up with a good deal of assurance, and took up the chase again. But even a Goods could go faster than Tutta, and so for hours he had to stumble along the moonlit track alone, till at last, when the first dawn was beginning to pale the flaring lamps, he came to his third station. He walked up to the ticket-collector. "I have chased it for twenty miles. Where has it gone ?" . . .

Back in his own country, Tutta made his way to Panda Baba. He had known the old man from his childhood, and had a great faith in his powers. He, if anyone, could cure his hand. Besides, there had always been a bond between the two, the bond that unites simplicity and wisdom. Panda Baba gave the boy a little hut just outside his compound. He could not have him in his own house, because Tutta had lost his caste by going to Bilaspur and taking food from the Christian nurse. But Panda Baba gave him the hut, and daily he or some member of his household took food to him and fed him. Panda's wife was always grumbling about this, perhaps with some reason, for Tutta ate enormously, and it took

a long while to feed him. But she was too much in love with her husband to refuse him anything, and she carried out his orders with as much cheerfulness as she could summon.

Tutta now had an old solar topee, of a dirty khaki and without a brim, given him one day in the bazaar by a head constable who had found it on the rubbish heap outside the rest-house. This he wore always, for since neither of his hands were in action, taking it off and putting it on were major operations for him. Generally he removed it at bedtime by rubbing it against the door-post of his hut till it fell off. But sometimes he slept in it.

He was wearing it now, as he sat watching that bitch lead her admirers round his hut. His mouth opened wide, and a vast grin spread from ear to ear, his chin disappeared, but his eyes remained and reflected the smile that shone below them. That was woman, he thought, and suddenly the smile vanished. He had no woman. His nights were cold. You can fill your house with lights, he knew, you can build a palace of marble, but if there is no girl there, all is dark inside. You may eat, you may drink—how often he had sung the words—but life without a girl is wasted. As you cannot enjoy dried-up betel leaves, so a man cannot go to sleep without a girl to warm him. He had no woman. That was his sorrow. Poverty, sickness, pain, uselessness—these could be born—but not the cold empty nights, with the wind coming through the wall, and sometimes rain falling from the roof.

Not that he was a bull ranging the fields for victims to

do him pleasure. He had never been one for laughing and talking with the girls. No. On the whole, he reflected, he didn't like girls. Half of them were witches : they put the evil eye on you. He had never really believed that story about the owl : in his own private opinion, all his troubles were due to a Baiga girl who had overlooked him. It had been the power of her eye that had thrown him into the fire. And now he thought of it, there had been an old woman in that train at Bilaspur, sitting in the carriage just behind the engine. She had undoubtedly caused all the trouble then. Singaru—that was a dangerous girl—looked at you as if she didn't know you were there, looked at all the men like that. That type always saw the most. Satula too, a witch if ever there was one, married to that old lion Julan. And as for Tiharu !—Tutta shivered a little : look what she had done to Bhuta ; no doubt he deserved it, but all the same it showed what the women could do, and how careful you must be. There was only one girl of whom he really approved—Phulmat, merry, beautiful, kind. Phulmat wasn't like other girls, always chasing after jewellery and new clothes, and the men who could provide them. She hardly wore any ornaments, though Gamira was ready to spend all his money on her. Once —Tutta had never forgotten it—she had sold a silver bangle for him, and with the money he had been able to buy a few nights of pleasure with an Ahir girl who had been staying in Sitaram's house. But the love you paid for turned sour afterwards. Often Phulmat brought him some vegetable or jungle fruit to supplement the

rather austere diet provided by Panda's wife. And it was not only for him she did it ; she looked after all the miserable people in the village. One of the reasons why Bhuta hated her so much was her advocacy of the cause of his sick wife. Phulmat had said openly in the village that he ought to send her some money every month. That, thought Tutta, was perhaps going a little far, but it showed what a kind and good heart the girl had. Phulmat was always missing her meals, for she could not eat if there was sorrow or anger in any house in the village.

Tutta took a puff at his pipe. Yes, that tobacco even had been brought by her. He began to feel a little better. Presently Tok Singh came out of Hothu's house, strolled across the road and sat down beside him. He looked disturbed.

Tok Singh was large and strong, rather slow, with a pleasant face slightly pock-marked. There was little to choose between him and Tiblu. The two friends were both disciples of Panda Baba ; both would be *gunia* one day. Tiblu was the more handsome, with his curly hair and happy expression ; Tok Singh had better features, and was taller, heavier, stronger—stronger in every way than Tiblu, who suffered from his amiability and kindness. But Tiblu was more of an artist ; there was more poetry in him ; he was a fine singer, and when he got hold of the drum in the Karma Dance, it was said that there was not a girl in the village who would refuse to run away with him. Both men were always very good to Tutta.

So Tok Singh sat and smoked for a while in silence. Tutta waited. It was his practice never to initiate a conversation.

"Women," said Tok Singh suddenly. "Women are the cause of all our misfortunes."

"Yes, yes," said Tutta with eager approval. This was a subject on which he might claim to be an expert.

"Witches!" murmured Tok Singh reflectively. Tutta let his pipe fall from his lips; he was certain that Tok Singh was on the verge of a revelation; he must have heard something in Hothu's house.

"Baiga witches!" said Tok Singh again. He evidently shared his father's antipathy to Baigas, even if he was not above consulting them in an emergency. "Do you know what the old man has just been saying?"

"How should I know?" asked Tutta a little irritably. This man was really a very long while coming to the point.

"He was telling us how the first witches were made. This is what happened. Nanga Baiga, you know, the first of the Baigas whom they are always talking about, and all his family lived in the jungle. Who knows where? Nanga Baiga had all the magic that there was in the world. So when he came to die, he told his sons not to bury him, but to cut up his body and put it into twelve pots, and cook it for twelve years. Then they could eat it, and all his magic would come to them. But after twelve years, just when everything was ready, God himself came to them disguised as a sadhu, and told them what a great sin it would be to eat their own father's body.

God was afraid, you see, that if they did eat it, they would become too powerful. He persuaded them to throw the pots into the river instead. As they did so, a little of the steam went into the mouth of the youngest son, and he became the first *gunia*, but that was all he got of his father's magic. But the pots floated away down the river to a place where a one-eyed Gondin, a lame Dhobin and a crippled Chamarin were washing their clothes."

A Dhobin, a Chamarin and a Gondin! Tutta shivered with a delicious fear. You might meet them all any day at the Chakmaktola bazaar. "Go on," he said. "Go on."

"These three old women waded out into the river and brought the pots to shore. 'Aha, meat for supper to-day,' they said. And they began to eat the flesh immediately. At once their whole bodies were filled with magic. There was a fig tree on the bank of the river. They looked at it, and with the poison of their gaze, it withered away. Then they made up two and a half spells, and sent out their *bhut* (familiar) to get men for them. The *bhut* went to the nearest village and killed seven men. After a few days the three witches went to the burying-place and dug up the bodies. They gave them life, but they bound them by their spells so that they couldn't move. They bathed them, and when they had done everything to them, they cut off their heads. They drank the blood, then they removed the livers and ate them, and then they buried them again. Those were the first witches. And the old Baiga says that Tiharu

comes of the same family, and that we must be very careful."

"He is right," said Tutta nodding his head emphatically. "I have said so a hundred times. He is absolutely right."

"My aunt was a witch," confided Tok Singh, lowering his voice a little. "She lived in Sitalpani. Once, on her way home from the bazaar, she caught the *bhut* of a pakri tree in a cloth, and took it home, kept it tied up in the cloth for five days. On the sixth day she let it go. It was angry and it went all round the village and by night five or six boys had died of fever."

"How did they find out?" asked Tutta breathlessly.

"Her brother-in-law was a very great *gunia*, and he called all the women of the village together. He gave every one of them a leaf and a little murria flour on each leaf. Then he told them to spit on the flour and mix it into a paste with their fingers. They were all able to spit except my aunt, and so they knew it was her. First of all they beat her with castor branches until she promised to send the *bhut* away. She got four hens, killed three of them, but sent the *bhut* into the fourth and drove it away into the jungle."

"And then they let her go?"

"Certainly not. They broke a black glass bangle and slit open her forehead with the sharp edge, and made her drink blood and pig's dung and man's dung, all mixed together in a shoe."

"What are these horrid stories, and why are you both looking so miserable?" Tutta looked up. There was

Phulmat herself, one hand holding her sari to her head, the other waved slightly outwards, the embodiment of graceful movement.

"We were talking about women," said Tok Singh darkly.

She wagged her finger at him. "Of course, Singaru. I know, I know."

"We never mentioned Singaru," he protested, agitated. "Ask Tutta. I will eat your flesh if we once took her name."

"No," said Tutta. "We were talking about witches."

"Well, I knew a girl called Adri," said Phulmat, coming close to them and looking round cautiously. "She was of Chuktipani, very pretty, but such a little drab. Very powerful with her love-magic though. She used to run away from her own village to Durree-dadar, and hide in the jungle outside—and she'd have ten or twelve boys in one day. Off and on, off and on, it went on all day long. But never at night. Oh, no, she was quite respectable. Then her husband used to come with a cudgel as thick as your wrist—and three months later she'd turn up again. Off and on, off and on, all day long." She clapped her hands with a shout of laughter.

"And then? Where is she now?" asked Tutta.

"Why do you want to know?" She held up a warning finger, leant forward, whispered dramatically. "Do you know what happened to her? She got triplets—three darling little babies, each one by a different father, all at once."

Tutta's eyes were almost out of his head. "I've said so a hundred times," he said solemnly. "A man can't be too careful these days. You say her name was Adri?" he went on a little anxiously.

"Yes, Adri, married to a great black bull of a man with a thick beard."

Tutta sat silent, searching his memory, pondering a bit of news he had heard last week at the bazaar. Tok Singh got up and left them. Phulmat peered into the hut. "What a hovel!" she exclaimed. "When did you last clean it?"

"It's all broken now," he said humbly. "And the wind comes in."

"We are plastering mud up at our house; I'll go and bring a little, and we'll try to make this better." Like the wind she was gone.

Soon she was back, with a basket piled high with wet black mud, mixed with little bits of straw. This she emptied on to the floor of the hut, and went for another load, and then a third. The third time little Jiggeri came behind her, with a tiny basket of mud on her head also. Tutta sat still and watched. When they had brought sufficient, Jiggeri went for a potful of water to make the mud more easy to handle, and Phulmat set to work plastering the frail walls. It took her some time, and it was nearly dark when she had finished. Even then the floor remained. "I will do that to-morrow," she promised. She paused. "No, not to-morrow: we are all going to get mangoes to-morrow."

"Now I will always love this house," he told her shyly.

She squatted down beside him, warming her hands in front of the little fire he kept going all day. "Now listen," she said. "It is cold, and you have no one to warm you. . . ."

He looked at her ; wild hope came to him.

"No, of course I don't mean that." Of course she didn't. What a fool he was even to think it ; another fate was written on his forehead. "But you must have some clothes and a blanket."

"And I suppose Dariya will give them to me," he said a little bitterly, seeing the long-footed Panka go by.

"Don't be a fool. I have brought my *dhar* for you. There is a man in Chakmaktola who will give you money for them. Go there and with whatever you get buy cloth and a blanket at the next bazaar."

"But what will your husband say ? "

She laughed. "I told them all that the rings were stolen, by magic. But I was the thief ; there was no other. I put them in another hiding-place. Now they are vowing vengeance on Bhuta. That is also to my advantage, for the man hates me. Even his shadow is full of poison. Yesterday, I was sitting outside Tiharu's house, talking to that poor girl, his wife, and he came by. His shadow fell on me, and my liver began to tremble."

Tutta was not concerned at the moment with trembling livers. "But if Gamira finds out ? " he asked.

"Fool, he will not find out. Go to Chakmaktola, I say. The merchant there asks no questions. But now I must go. It is dark and what will the village say if I

sit all night talking to a mad fellow?" She smiled gaily at him and was gone.

That night Tutta sat long with Panda Baba. Up in the village they were singing, seated round the fire, shouting with all the vigour of their lungs.

The rain is falling gently, gently.
The musel grass is growing high.
The cows that were grazing in the musel
Are returning home in the evening—
A tiger is chasing the calves—
And a lover follows his girl in the evening.

The words came faintly to their ears. "Tok Singh was telling me that you were talking about witches to-day," said Panda Baba presently.

Tutta shivered. "Yes. It is very dangerous, life is very dangerous."

"It is all right as long as you do not yield to a *churel*," said the old man solemnly.

A *churel* is the ghost of a woman who has died in childbirth. To other women she is always an object of terror, for she comes in the twilight seeking for a child to love; she may steal it, or she may possess another woman, filling her with her own restless longings. But to men she is an object of delight, for in the Gond otherworld even unsubstantial death is amorous, yet if they yield to her she will bring evil on them in the end.

"I remember twenty years ago in Rabda village there

was a very good *gunia* ; he protected many people from the power of the witches. One witch specially hated him. She turned herself into a tiger, and chased him ; but he bound her by his charms and she couldn't move. Then she became a snake, but when she came to bite him he easily drove her away. Then she became a partridge, and went to the jungle and collected hundreds of other partridges. They waited for the *gunia* by the roadside, and when they came they all flew up into the air at once. It made such a terrible noise that the old man fainted. At once the witch sent a *churel* to him, and when he recovered there she was in the form of a beautiful young virgin beside him."

"He must have been happy for that night," said Tutta.

"Yes, and a week afterwards he died. After he was dead, the witch went with the *churel* to the burying-place and pulled the corpse out of the earth. Then his spirit went in a dream to his two brothers and woke them up ; they ran quickly to see what had happened. They climbed a tree, but the witch bound them there, and they couldn't get down."

"I know what happened then," said Tutta. "I don't want to hear any more."

They sat silent for a time. Then : "I hear that Adri is coming to stay in Rannu's house," said Tutta. A long pause. "Gamira was once in love with Adri."

"How do you know that ?" asked Panda Baba, astonished.

"I sit and listen all day while other people talk, so I

hear many things," said Tutta calmly. Another pause. "That girl will bring sorrow to this village. Can you do nothing, Pandaji?"

"It is in the hands of god," began the old man, but for a second time he was to meet scepticism about this statement.

"Listen," whispered Tutta rather fearfully, glancing at the long row of gods and goddesses hanging from the wall—Narbada Mai in the form of a whip of cow's-hair, Hardul Baba in the shape of an axe, a chain of spikes that was the dwelling-place of Mother Earth. "Listen. Don't tell it aloud, for fear some spirit trouble me: but I don't believe in the gods at all." A pause. He shook his head. "No, there cannot be any gods. The man who works in the fields is the true devotee." A very long pause. "To ask help from the gods is like a man shaking a mango tree on the side of a mountain where all the fruit falls in a stony place and he cannot get it." Another pause. Panda Baba sat petrified with astonishment. "A child runs into the temple and shouts. But it only hears the echo of its own voice." He nodded two or three times with great conviction.

"Where did you learn all this?" asked Panda Baba at last, a little sharply, for he was alarmed at this spread of infidelity in his village. "Have you never met the *bhut* in the forest?"

"Oh, the *bhut*. I am tired of them. They are nothing. I have often seen them. But I have never seen Bara Deo——"

"I should hope not," interrupted Panda Baba a little

spitefully. "Even to me such a vision has never been given."

"Never?" asked Tutta, in a voice of such astonishment that the old man saw that his prestige was likely to suffer if he allowed this admission to become current.

"Well," he corrected, "we do not speak of these things to everyone. I may have seen, or I may not have seen."

"I once thought I had seen him," went on Tutta very slowly. "If the gods can dwell in an axe or a chain, then why not in the eyes or hands of people?"

This was new talk for Panda Baba, and he digested it in silence for a time, in the meanwhile maintaining an expression of extreme disapproval.

"And I thought I saw the Earth Mother once in a woman's eyes. That nurse in the big hospital. . . ."

"Impossible," said Panda Baba. "She was a Christian."

"Nevertheless, she looked at me as the Earth Mother might look if we could see her. And sometimes I have seen the hands of god. . . ."

"Where, boy?"

Tutta hesitated. "Phulmat's hands are like the hands of god, full of kindness. God might sweep a poor man's house, and give him cloth for the cold nights."

"Then you have seen god, boy."

"Yes, but not your god, so far away in the jungle, or hanging like a fool on the walls of your house, so greedy for black cocks and castrated pigs. My god is a bastard and an outcaste. Yours lives on the mountain-

tops and wears the sacred thread and no one may go near him. But my god takes a broom and sweeps my house, and Gonds won't let him take food in their kitchens."

Panda Baba was startled. "No more of this," he said. "Soon you will turn Christian or Mussalman and be ruined for ever. Well, I will give a dinner to the tribe for you, and then you can live in my house and be happy. Say anything you will against the gods, for who knows if they can hear, but never speak this madness against our tribe. The tribe is all we have left. The tribe is the cactus-fence that protects us against our enemies. They will rob us of everything, but they can never rob us of the tribe. That is our house of safety."

"What has the tribe done for me?" asked Tutta, suddenly angry. "When I was ill, it was a Mussalman and a Christian who helped me. Here in the village, except for you, it is a Pardhan who comes and cares for me. I don't believe in any of these things. There is nothing in the world but friendliness. That cannot die."

"That is true, for friendship comes down from the sky. But we are of the earth, and we must cling to the tribe as long as we are of the earth. By the rope of the tribe we may one day climb towards the sky."

That night Tutta fell asleep thinking of the *churel*, and sure enough, in the night, she came to him. Like a beautiful little raimuniya bird, yellow and red, it flew into his hut, perched on his topee first, then as it hopped down beside him, turned into a lovely naked girl. All night she lay with him, and at dawn was a little bird again.

When he got up, Tutta was at first depressed because he knew the *churel* would bring evil to him. But Panda Baba suggested an entirely different interpretation. It was no ghost of the dead, he said, but the living spirit of one who loved him ; it showed that someone wanted him, longed for him, was doing magic to possess him. But he could not tell who it was. Tutta had had a wild hope that it was Phulmat, but Phulmat's breasts were long and tapering, while this girl's were round and firm like two rounded hills.

CHAPTER VI

YOUTH OF DELIGHT

WHEN the forest is green all the world goes to pick wild mangoes. Early next morning a little party left Mulmula for the Hill of Mangoes, five miles away along a forest path. They went in file, for the way was narrow; first Tok Singh, then Tiblu and Gamira, followed by Satula, Singaru and Phulmat, with Nanas and Jiggeri bringing up the rear.

They had not gone a mile before they began to sing forest-songs, improvising them as they went along, for the glory of the morning worked strongly within them. Everything spoke poetry to them that day. A deer leapt across the road, and with a swift swagger of brown haunches was gone into the thicket. They shouted with joy, and Phulmat sang :

O we went to the jungle to catch the deer.
Let us sleep together in a silken bed.
Hold me so close that no air can pass between us.

They sang it over and over again till nature changed their theme. A group of monkeys chattered in the trees, and they shouted back at them, and began to sing :

O we went to the jungle to see the monkeys in the tree.
I am hiding in the bushes.
Tell me truly, will you come or no ?

A little later they passed two women gathering large broad leaves to thatch their roofs against the rain.

O we went to the jungle to get leaves for our thatch.
O my girl, give me what you promised long ago.
Don't fail to give it to me before the rains begin.

Their voices echoed in the hills.

At last they reached the Hill of Mangoes, and for a time they were silent, wandering here and there, eating as much as they could. The party gradually separated, and Satula and Tiblu slowly drew away from the others. Tiblu was very depressed, for almost all Singaru's attention that day had been given to Tok Singh, and though he knew she would never let herself be alone with him, he felt annoyed and miserable. At such times he always went to Satula, who had great gifts of sympathy, and now they wandered on from tree to tree until, their baskets full, they sat down to rest in the shade of a great canopy of golden amaltas flowers glowing rich and splendid against copper leaves. They could hear the shouts and laughter of the others distantly through the trees.

The happiest days of Satula's life had been passed far away to the south, in the remote and mysterious forests of Bastar. Her father Chintu had been a great wanderer, going from house to house with his fiddle, a master of

bawdy tales. But he made little of it, and when, after his wife's death, she came to him in a dream and told him to go towards the south and find happiness there, he set out immediately. With him was little Satula, then about ten years old. They left the great green sal forests of the Maikal Hills for the lowlands, and for many weary days tramped across the parched plains of Raipur. Then they came to the fantastic rockery of Kanker, and Satula never forgot the grotesque impossible patterns that the hills made against the sky. There were ogres, said her father, living in every one of them, their sole food was little girls. At last, one evening, in a great thunderstorm and a torrent of rain, they saw in the distance the hills that stand sentinel before the highlands of Bastar. They climbed them fearfully, starting at every sound, for the people of Kanker had told many stories of ghosts and witches, and dark whispered hints of human sacrifice. But they were welcomed with friendliness everywhere, and when Chintu enquired for work they pointed him still further to the south.

But Chintu soon found that a Pardhan was of small account in that country, so he began to give out that he was a Muria Gond. He dressed Satula in the style and bought her the ornaments of the Murias. He himself put on a bead head-band and wore the Muria earrings. And as they slowly journeyed south they soon learnt the customs and language of the tribe. Satula was a good dancer, and after watching two or three Muria dances, was able to join the other little girls in the villages where they stayed.

Then they came to the village of Masora, where they had heard work was to be had. And work there was in the fields of the headman, but there was little profit in it, and Chintu would have gone away after a few days had not a Muria girl, on the very first night of their stay, enchanted him, and for love of her he was like a man demented, neither eating nor sleeping till she came to live with him.

Then he forgot the world, forgot his own country and his family, laughed at poverty and hunger in the joy of that Muria girl. The village made no objection, but they demanded a dinner from him because he was a stranger. No one really believed that he was a Muria, but still less did they guess the truth ; they suspected that he was really a Raj-Gond from the north, and were not a little flattered at his condescension. For the Murias are eaters of beef, and other Gonds refuse to share their food. So Chintu settled in a little hut on the edge of the village, and was supremely happy. All around was forest and beyond it they could see the dim outline of the Abujhmar Hills.

Not far away was another little house, very clean and cosy, with one small door that was more like a trap than a real door. This was the Gotul of the village. Here the boys and girls of Masora gathered evening by evening, and worked, danced, played, and slept together. It was their own free republic ; they elected their own officers to control their fates and days ; their parents had no say in their affairs. At first Chintu was very suspicious—all this sleeping together ; such things were

unknown in Mandla. But he dared not make any objection, and his girl said it was the happiest thing in their lives, and in any case children were little gods, and must not be interfered with. So Chintu gave in, but the first night he crept out in the dark and peeped into the Gotul to see that everything was all right. Certainly it looked very cosy. A bright fire burning, drums slung against the wall, a discreet curtain hiding one corner, and the children playing with one another, or spreading their hands to the fire.

At first, however, Satula was very shy and nervous. She too had never heard of anything like this. And she was frightened of the Jhaliyaru, the leader of the girls, a tall hard-featured lass of about fifteen, who took her aside and explained her duties.

" All the boys and girls come here," she said, " and we each have a special friend. Then you will be a *motiari* and your boy is called a *chelik*. You will find a boy in time. It's rather dull here till you do, but never mind. You must come here every evening. If you are away for more than two days, your father will have to pay a fine. Your work will be to clean the courtyard every morning. If you don't do it properly, you'll be turned out."

Large-eyed, Satula listened.

" We stay here till we marry. Very often we marry our *chelik*, but we don't have to. You will sleep with him every night, but you're not to do it till we give the word. Understand ? " she asked sharply.

Satula nodded dumbly, though she had a very vague idea of what the last bit meant.

" You'll be very happy," went on the bigger girl, " so long as you obey the rules. You must never do it inside the Gotul, only out in the fields or jungle. The Silledar is the head of all of us, and you've got to obey him. If your boy gives you a child, then you mustn't try to kill it ; you'll probably have to marry him. I can't think of anything else to tell you. You're very pretty "—looking at her critically—" you'll soon get a good boy."

Satula hung her head and ran away. She didn't understand half what the girl had told her, but it sounded frightening. All the others, however, were very kind and friendly, though when they danced together, every *chelik* with his *motiari*, she had to stand up against the wall with another little girl, a very ugly one, hair-lipped and pock-marked who couldn't get a boy. And at bed-time, when they gave her a bamboo mat, she had to share it with the ugly little girl, which was not very interesting.

The next morning, while she was cleaning the court, a little boy of about her own age came to watch her. His name was Bannu and he was the Ramsu who had the duty of keeping the girls busy about their various duties. That first day he strutted like a peacock before her, pointed out tiny scraps of dirt, insisted on her sweeping behind the house. The next day he was quieter, but still dignified, a cock rather than a peacock. And the third day she hardly knew he was there, he was so quiet.

In the meantime she had gone to the bazaar and bought a handful of beads which, with the Jhaliyaru's help, she strung into a necklace. " Keep this with you," said the

Jhaliyaru, who was romantic enough at heart, " and give it to your boy when you find him."

And then on the fourth evening, as she stood up against the wall watching the dance, Bannu came shyly up to her and timidly offered a small wooden comb.

" I made it for you myself," he whispered.

Satula trembled with excitement and delight. She was a *motiari*. She had found her boy. They all cheered, and laughed at them, and that night they slept together on their little mat.

Thereafter, every night when the dance was over, and they had all gone into the Gotul and shut the door, and were far, far distant from the world, warm in the cosy firelight, she would make Bannu sit before her, and with the comb shake out his black locks, rub in a little oil, smooth them and tidy them. Then she would pass the points of the comb lightly over his arms, soothing them, and then with great vigour massage his back. After that she would put first one arm and then another round his neck and rub it thoroughly. She would have liked to have rubbed his legs, but that was not allowed. And as they worked, they sang : " *Relo-re-relo-relo-re-relo.*"

Then at last came the day when for the first time Bannu went with his father to guide the plough across their field. That evening the Silledar took him aside and told him that it was now time that he took upon him the duties and delights of manhood.

" Do you think I'm a baby ? " demanded Bannu indignantly. " I've watched you all for the last three years——"

"And you've done it?" broke in the leader, hostile and suspicious.

"Of course I haven't. I'll swear by the earth, I'll eat earth to prove it. But now when may I begin?"

"To-night," said the Silledar with a careless nod. He was disappointed. He always enjoyed initiating the younger boys. He called the Jhaliyaru. "You'd better explain everything to the little girl," he said. "That boy knows too much, he may harm her. And see that they don't do it indoors."

It was a perfect night. There was a great moon. Bannu had brought a bottle of wine. They had never danced so well. That night Satula led the singing.

Last night, at midnight [sang the boys] *I heard your voice as I was sleeping,*
And all my hair stood up on end.
For a long year I've watched the road for you.
I stood by the field, waiting to clasp you to my heart.

Then the girls replied, bending low and clapping their hands, swinging to and fro in the rhythm of the dance.

As the whirlpool in the river allows nothing to escape,
As the fish cannot wriggle out of the net,
So I will never let you go.

BOYS. *The ripe mango falls in my garden,*
Your words of yesterday are still in my mind.

GIRLS. *In a small hut by the roadside sings a bird.*

There is laughter in my face, but my heart is burning for you.

BOYS. *Rain fell in the night, and a mouse ran across the mud.*
I did not know you were coming, but I saw your shadow at the door.
You came, but you would not show me your beauty.

GIRLS. *The shade of the tamarind is very cool.*
I came, but you did not expect my coming.
You took no notice of me, for you were angry with me.

BOYS. *The rain poured down, but in both our rivers there was no water.*
I have wandered all over Orissa and Bastar, but I've never met a girl like you.
If only I could catch you, I would run away with you.

GIRLS. *The grass is growing very high.*
If in your body there is true desire,
Then meet me there among the flowering grass.

Then the dance changed, and they broke up, and every *motiari* ran to her boy, and they put their arms round each other, and danced two by two in a large circle. Satula closed her eyes as she swung to and ro in her *chelik*'s arms, filled with an ecstasy of delight. The great moon shone down upon them, free and natural as the earth herself, children unspoilt in the unhindered freedom of their own republic.

Then they went in, and she combed his hair, now rich

and glossy, and rubbed those shining brown limbs, until at a word from the Silledar they unrolled their little mats and went to sleep two by two all round the room. Late that night, they crept out together into the moonlit fields.

So the years passed. The old Silledar married his girl, and left the Gotul, never to return ; his successor almost immediately made his *motiari* pregnant, and in the presence of everyone she took him by the hand and he declared himself the father, and they too were married, but not with the full ceremonial of a proper marriage. So at last Bannu found himself the oldest boy there, and was made Silledar, and Satula, a little later, largely through his influence, was made the Jhaliyaru, the leader of the girls.

But soon after this, Chintu's girl left him and in his wretchedness he felt a longing for his own country, for the high sacred Maikal Hills. Satula was ready to go with her father, for though she loved Bastar, she could not forget that she was Maikal-kanya, daughter of Maikal, and that she was bound to return in the end.

When she told Bannu he wanted to come with her, but she realized what would happen if he discovered that she was only a Pardhan, and she refused. So he made her a beautiful comb, and she made a bead head-band, and on their last night together they had a feast in the Gotul. Satula made her *chelik* a special chutney of red ants, very tasty, and after they had eaten, they exchanged their gifts, and took a solemn farewell.

She was then some fifteen years of age, and he a little older.

He was very strange at their parting, and long afterwards she heard that he had thrown himself into a well because of loneliness.

This was the story that Satula told Tiblu as they sat, very close together, under the canopy of golden amaltas flowers glowing rich and splendid against copper leaves. He listened breathlessly. If only he could have lived with Singaru in a Gotul, had her as his *motiari*, slept with her all through his frustrated boyhood !

" And then when you came home ? " he asked.

" My father married me to an ugly dirty boy covered with sores. A week afterwards he—" Tiblu knew that she meant Julan, whose name she must never take—" he came and hid in the jungle near our house. An old woman used to carry messages between us. And in two or three days I ran away with him."

" And your father : what did he do ? "

She laughed at the memory of it. " He was so angry. He beat everyone he could find. My aunt hid in her house, and he broke down the door and dragged her out and beat her. Of course, he was very drunk. And he got hold of my husband and beat him so hard that he had to stay in bed for a week. He said to my husband : ' If you weren't strong enough to satisfy the little bitch, why didn't you ask me and my four brothers—we would have helped you.' "

They both chuckled at this, and then were silent for a time.

"What can I do?" asked Tiblu at last. "You see how much she talks to Tok Singh."

"You must have a love-charm. Do you know any?"

"None. But I'll go to Tiharu."

"No, don't have anything to do with that wicked old callet. I can tell you a good one."

She put her mouth to his ear and whispered. When she had finished he flung his arms round her. "You lovely, beautiful girl," he said. "Let me love you a little."

She pushed him away, but very gently. "No, no, no," she said. "Look, the others are coming."

And so they were, singing at the top of their voices, baskets of mangoes balanced on their heads. They roared with laughter when they saw Satula and Tiblu sitting there alone, and Singaru—Tiblu was glad to notice—looked just a little annoyed. For Satula was still a very beautiful girl.

When they got back to the village, Tok Singh gave a generous share of his mangoes to Tutta. But Gamira refused. "No," he said. "He can easily go and get some himself if he wants to."

All the evening Tutta sat blissfully sucking the sweet fresh juice. Half the village was sucking mangoes; the voice of envy and scandal was hushed; there were no quarrels that day; the witches rested from their labours; they were possessed by the wild free spirit of the forest, filled with delight in the most precious of its fruits.

CHAPTER VII

SWELTER'D VENOM

I

"ARE you sure that all will be well? How can you be certain?" Gamira walked restlessly up and down the court, his hands twitching nervously. Phulmat sat by the door of their hut, gazing anxiously into the dark unwindowed interior. Julan sat in lion-like princely immobility, surveying all these things, but not disturbed by them.

From within sounded a monotonous droning, very regular and monotonous. There was the sound, too, of rice being shaken in a basket. They could distinguish a few words, a low tense whisper that rose above the droning. "Come, come. . . . Enter. . . . Here's trouble, trouble, trouble . . ." The words trailed away, and were lost in that uncanny rhythm.

It was nearly a year since the Snake had bitten. It was not till the last three months that Gamira had begun to feel nervous. Then his anxiety was roused largely by Phulmat's fears. Phulmat had had one of her moods. At such times she lost much of her charm, almost as if she had been suddenly de-sexed. Then she was hardly

pretty at all, her magnetism disappeared in a pout, and the beautiful oval of her face became heavy and full of shadows. In the last few months she had tried Gamira sorely. There was a clinging faithfulness about her which troubled him, and at the same time she slightly repulsed him, as if her flesh shrank—in ever so subtle a fashion—from contact with any man. And so she no longer satisfied him physically, while spiritually she tried his nerves by her continuous fussing. She had infected him with her own terrors. Would Bhuta try to kill him at a distance, by magic? Was he even now making an earthen image of him, and piercing it through and through with porcupine quills? Or would a real snake come from the underworld of the cobra king and bite him? Why had the silver *dhar* been stolen? They must have been taken for magic, surely it was for magic. Bhuta too had been alarming enough. Every evening he went to the wind-swept forest above the village, and it was said that he kept a whole family of snakes in his dark house. The shadow of Tiharu's curse had grown larger, and even children claimed to have seen it. One day little Jiggeri ran home screaming with fear, crying out that she had seen a man with a black vulture perched upon his shoulders, and that the man was already dead. Bhuta had begun to play the flute, weird tunes they seemed of the spirit world, angry and menacing. The children trembled as they heard the sound at night, and crept closer to their bright fires. At the Jawara Festival, the feast of the fresh green wheat, he had fallen, with the others, into a trance. But while they had been possessed

by the Goddess of the crops or by some innocent mischief-making spirit, he had fallen to the ground with a strange hissing sound, and had writhed there, like a monstrous snake or lizard, his jaws snapping, and his tongue shooting in and out.

Gamira went into the hut. He found Panda Baba sitting in ecstasy, withdrawn into himself, absorbed, intent, holding a bamboo basket half full of rice which he was rubbing with his right hand in a rhythmic circular motion. Gamira knew that the old man's spirit was away in the unseen world, travelling across jungle and mountains and rivers, down to hell and up to Pawan Dassorie's heaven in search of the spirits set loose by Bhuta to do them harm.

Suddenly there was a subtle change. Panda's body stiffened in expectation ; his hand began to move with incredible swiftness. Once more came that mysterious whisper—" O stranger, whence art thou ? Who sent thee ? Here's trouble, trouble . . ." There was a sudden convulsive movement and his hand was jerked away from the basket. The droning ceased abruptly. There was a deep silence. The spirits had come. Gamira felt the hair rising all over his body ; sweat broke out on his forehead. Then there was a tiny whisper. " Thou hast found my enemy, O master. Tell me what he wants. I will give him anything, but thou must protect me." There was silence again. Panda Baba sat very still and erect, listening. At last he suddenly relaxed, drooping downwards like a broken plant, and turning to Gamira said slowly and with apparent difficulty, he was so

exhausted : " We must offer a goat who is still at the milk, and a pure black chicken before eight days are over. Then it will be well."

In the evening Panda Baba returned. In his left hand he carried a brass pot full of water. Phulmat had prepared a little fire in the middle of the court, and had smeared a small patch with cow-dung in front of it. Now, with a handful of flour, she was tracing on it fantastic patterns. Panda Baba squatted down beside the fire ; Gamira sat opposite ; Julan impassively and Satula anxious and excited watched from the door of their house. Outside in the street sat Tutta, his round face puckered and alarmed, not daring to come in for fear of Julan's tongue and Satula's eye.

When they were ready, Panda Baba motioned to Gamira who went to the back of the house and brought a small black goat, bleating piteously and contesting every inch of the way. When Satula saw it, she ran forward and fell at Panda Baba's feet, begging him (as was her duty as an Eti-Kumrin) not to harm it. " I will give you two rupees if you will save it," she cried. But she did not press the bargain, and her duty done, went back to the kitchen and hid behind the door. Goat or no goat, she was determined to see all that was going on.

Phulmat brought a small vessel full of rice, and they all tried to make the goat eat. But it was small and very frightened, and for a long time it refused, until Phulmat was in tears, for if it continued in its refusal it would mean that the spirits were angry and would not help them.

"Don't be anxious," said Julan. "The god isn't ready yet. Put a little *sendur* on its forehead."

Phulmat hastily brought some of the bright red powder and daubed the creature's forehead. And then suddenly it began to eat, greedily, to its damnation.

For directly it had finished, Panda Baba swung his small, razor-sharp axe, and with a single blow cut off the little head. The blood spurted out, and the old man caught some of it and sprinkled it on the fire.

"Give me the little dish," he whispered to Phulmat, and when she had handed it to him he filled it quarter-full with the blood and gave it to her. She went to the kitchen to heat it, but when Satula saw the goat's blood she gave a loud cry of disgust and went right out of the house and down the street. But inside, when the blood was heated, they offered it to the household gods, to Majota Deo who saves the home from illness and sorrow, to Dulha Deo who protects the marriage-bed, to Bitrain, who guards the cooking-pots.

Then they came out again, where Panda Baba was waiting for them, with his brass pot full of water in his hand.

"Put a little salt in here," he said, holding out the pot to Phulmat, "and now a bit of that old shoe, and the iron needle." She did as she was ordered, then poured a little *ghee* on the fire, driving up a thin curl of smoke. Panda Baba and Gamira drank a little wine, first pouring a few drops ceremonially on the ground. They put a long nail ready. Then Panda Baba stood up, and waved

the pot of water three times above Gamira's head. As he did so he said very distinctly and solemnly :

By the power of the Broken Shoe,
By the power of the Nine Iron Needles,
I bind the hostile spirits.
Immortal Nail !
Immortal Charm !

He picked up the nail, placed it point downward on the ground, and drove it deep into the earth with a single blow of his axe. Then he said again :

Tremble, O Earth, and rouse the Old Serpent for our succour.
Basuk Nag ! Sesh Nag ! Bara Nag !
I cry aloud to Sukh Nag.
Awake ! Awake ! Beware !

II

Adri was drawing water from the pond which lay on the plateau above the village, a little below the green plain where the people went to dance. Trees grew all round it, but at a small distance, giving it an austere and lonely look. And there was Adri drawing water, alone. She was a glorious golden brown ; that was what you noticed in her—colour ; form, line, contour hardly mattered in that brilliant orange gold. She wore a white sari bordered with red. So as you looked at her you had an impression of red and gold and white—it was a royal

sight. Her hair was a rich brown, carefully hidden beneath the fold of her sari that passed over her head, but when she was excited it would begin to stray over her forehead—shy little creepers of enticement were those curls ; you would see them for a minute, and then they were back under their shelter ; but after that you knew that they were there. And you could not forget that thought. When she smiled it was as though a field of yellow ramtilla were lit by sunlight suddenly. Her whole body smiled ; eyes, nose, mouth, breasts, hands and feet were suffused with that brilliant joy.

But there was no more to her than that. She was a perfect animal of the forest, coloured, balanced, formed for every delight of the senses. But the mind, even the Gond mind, could not rest there. Not that she was stupid ; she was witty, entertaining, interesting ; she could talk pure poetry. No, it was not that. It was that underneath all that bravery of red and gold, there was an inner coldness, as many a man who had gone to spread his hands at her fire had found. At first, what splendour of heat ! What heaven-mounting flames ! Then the fire died, and you were twice as cold.

To the far side of the tank came Gamira, a bundle of wood on his head. He put it down wearily, and sat on the bank, the picture of dejection. No longer did he want to hurry home ; he would delay as long as he could to avoid Phulmat's fears, which even the power of Panda Baba's magic had been unable to allay. He was very tired, very miserable, anxious too, for to-morrow would be just a year since the Serpent Dance—to-day

was the last of danger, but as it was the last it was the most dangerous. He was physically unsatisfied, restless too under Phulmat's cloying protectiveness. A girl, he thought, should be elusive or passive ; she must not be the hunter. But nowadays Phulmat hunted him tirelessly. His mind turned back to a day when a party of dancers had come to his village ; it was long ago, before he had seen Phulmat ; they had danced the Rina, many women were dancing, each in a red sari and all their ornaments, in the clear light of the morning. Among them was a girl he had never wholly forgotten : he had met her several times before the dancers left the village ; she was Adri ; they had said some time ago that she was coming here, to stay with Rannu. Did he want her to come or no ? He was not quite sure. Suddenly he heard a splash of water, and looked up and across the pond. In a blaze of sunlight, against the background of trees, the water sparkling at her feet, he saw her. So she had come after all. And she was still just as he had always dreamed of her, a fire for the cold night. Now she was looking at him, questioning, wondering. She began to delay then ; spilt the water from her pot, had to refill it, began to wash some cloth, stirring and splashing in the water.

It was very lonely there—the women generally went to the well at the foot of the hill—and Gamira began to sing and she to answer him according to their custom. He got up and retreated among the trees so that she could not see him, but he became a voice to her.

"Where have you come from, O stranger ? My house has been empty many days."

"From beyond the seven seas I have come, brother, and my eyes are thirsty," she answered him across the water.

"The birds are singing in my mango grove"—he was slipping from tree to tree in order to come near her. "Come and refresh your eyes with the beauty of love."

"The field is full of mud; how can I come to you? See, I have dropped my pot among the reeds."

"What is a water-pot to me? I have a garland of jasmine. To whom shall I give it?" He was much nearer now.

"Give it to the girl whom you loved last night. Why speak of it to me?"

"I have forgotten all the nights that are past. Come, leave your water-pot, O stranger, and come home to me." At last he was by her side. A faint dry fragrance came to him from the fire. There was no sign of the dead coal. He was dazzled, a man under an enchantment.

"Why are you here?" he asked. "Have you remembered me?"

"I have come for a month to stay with my friend——"

"Who is she?"

She would not answer at first, did not care to take her name. "She lives in the house of the old tiger whose teeth are drawn." She laughed.

"Rannu's daughter? So you will be near me?"

"Certainly. My husband has gone for work on the roads, somewhere near Bilaspur."

"Then come"—he choked; he could not resist the

warmth of her fire ; his hands trembled a little ; he could hardly speak. " Come and stay in our house. Then you will be with your own tribe."

She stood for a moment wondering. " Very well," she said. " This evening I will come. Tell your wife to prepare food for me."

" But your husband ? What if he hears of it ? "

She looked scornfully. " He is my *kukra-raja*, my dog of a husband. He is black and old. What can he do ? "

She left him, and he sat on by the pond in agonized, delightful anticipation.

Satula was not pleased at the news that Adri was coming to stay with them, even if it meant that there would be an extra hand to work in the fields. She had noticed the gulf that was coming between Gamira and Phulmat, and she had begged Phulmat not to be so moody and tiresome. Now Adri's coming really frightened her. They could not afford Gamira keeping two girls, and it was unthinkable that he would drive Phulmat away. In any case, they would have to give compensation to the husband.

She was grinding wheat with a vicious energy, as if she would gladly have Gamira's head between the stones. " Why do you want to bring that girl here ? " she asked him, adding a few special *gali* to illustrate his parentage and morals. " You know what they say of her in her own village—she is free to every man that wants her, but no man wants her long."

Gamira grew angry. They started to argue, their voices rising. But Julan said in his deep voice from his

corner. "Stop, she shall stay." He was not averse to having another girl in the house. And that ended their talk, for he was king among them.

Phulmat hardly noticed what was proposed. She had not eaten all day ; an awful consciousness of evil oppressed her ; she could not put herself to anything. She kept on sweeping the courtyard again and again, singing very softly to herself :

Sleepless she sweeps the court,
But on her own heart lies the dust.

Sometimes she shivered as though a fever was on her.

But in the afternoon Singaru ran across to say that the old Baiga had come and that if they wanted to get his help they should go there at once, for Panda Baba had gone to fetch wood, and there was no one about. Phulmat was relieved to have something to do, and she went down to Hothu's house immediately. She found the old man sitting in a corner of the kitchen, looking rather portentous. He was secretly immensely pleased that one of Panda Baba's clients had come to him, and was determined to do his best without making any charge.

"He has never eaten or drunk with a Gond," said Hothu importantly, anxious to impress Phulmat as much as possible. "His mother was a pale yellow colour, more lovely than a Brahmin's. His father could cross rivers dryshod ; he could stop the hail and quench the fire by his magic."

"Yes, but could he cure a man bitten by a snake?" asked Phulmat anxiously.

"Certainly," said the old Baiga in as deep a voice as he could manage. "Come and sit here, my daughter, and I will tell you what to do if any misfortune befalls."

So Phulmat and Singaru went and sat at his feet, both feeling a little awkward in that dirty house, and not a little frightened of the old man. But he talked kindly enough, for he was a really good old man, and longed to defeat the malicious powers of evil that brooded over all their world. So he told them to gather the bark of tendu and char in case Gamira was bitten by a black cobra. They were to grind it, and mix it with water, and give him some to drink and stuff some up his nose. But if the little putki snake bit him they must get the root of the chandur nar, and for the long spotted jaddu snake the leaves and roots of the creeper they called phaduka nar, and for the long black evil-looking dundarkarail snake, the sukla grass that grows on a rock and some dankidotu roots—if possible from an ant-hill.

"And is there any charm that we can say?" asked Phulmat presently.

"Yes, I will give it to you, if you will promise to tell no one else. Specially you must promise not to tell your old Panda."

Phulmat promised eagerly, but the Baiga sent Singaru away before he would repeat it. "If he is bitten, call me and this is what I will say over him:

O Earth, I am thy disciple. Nanga Baiga, Nangin

Baigin, Nidhan Guru, Deogan Guru, Dantar Guru, Dannatar Guru, I am thy disciple. Let the poison be withdrawn! The poison of the old serpent, the poison of the black serpent, the poison of the jaddu snake, the poison of the snake of sin, the poison of the mountain snake—let it be drawn out of his body and enter into the Water Goddess.

May his body grow cool as water.
May the sharp pain be stilled.
May he once more rise up to bathe his body.
May he once more rise up to eat and drink.
May he once more walk in his courtyard.
May he once more walk in open places.
May he once more climb the hills and pass through the forest.
There may the bear and tiger turn into stone before him.
May each snake become a stick.
May thorns and stubble be as wax.
When he walks by night let no evil take him.
May light dawn on him.

When she heard this, Phulmat felt greatly relieved—it was clearly a powerful charm, and she thanked the old man by touching his feet and promising him gifts of wine, and then ran out to call Singaru. It was getting late and they must find the roots and leaves at once. They soon found the chandur nar—it was growing in their own fence—and it was easy to pull off some of the rough grey bark of the char tree that grew by Sitaram's

house, and a bit of the black bark of the tendu in their own garden. On the top of the hill there was plenty of sukla grass, its tufts bending before the wind. But it took them a long time to find the other shrubs. They had to go away into the forest, among the sal trees all covered with fresh green leaves, before they saw the small greenish-white flowers on the long grey branches of the dankidotu, and even that was not growing out of an ant-hill, but by itself. They could not find any phaduka nar anywhere, but it was drawing to evening, so they decided to leave it and come home and make ready what they had got.

It was very good for Phulmat to have something to do, and so absorbed was she in her task of pounding and mixing that she hardly noticed Adri's coming. Only Satula glared angrily at the visitor. But after sunset Phulmat's gloom returned. When they had finished supper she took Adri inside, and Gamira sat for some time by the fire in the court, talking with Julan. He had almost forgotten about Bhuta in the wonder of having Adri actually in his house. He was like a man under a spell, gazing on her delight with delighted eyes. At last he too rose and went into the hut. He lay down beside the fire, and Adri came to sit beside him, and massaged his limbs. A luxurious sense of peace came over him. He was drugged by the action of those strong firm hands. Phulmat was too anxious to be angry or jealous. She sat tormented with fear; her mind oppressed with an almost intolerable weight of foreboding, starting at every sound; once when a rat ran across the rafters, she jumped up with a little quavering cry.

Gamira looked at her with amused uncomprehending eyes. He was in a glow of sensuous forgetfulness. Everything was far away in the nearness of Adri.

"Don't worry, my heart," he said. "Go to sleep, no snake can get in here. We have stopped every hole. We are perfectly safe. Do go to sleep."

"Yes, do go to sleep," added Adri, all golden in the firelight. "I will stay awake to protect him."

"No," answered Phulmat, still strangely innocent of jealousy. "To-morrow I shall sleep, but not to-night." And in her voice that was almost like a blend of harmonies, she sang a line of one of her favourite dance-songs :

O sleeper rise, if thou would'st see at midnight the tree burst into flower.

Then she smiled as a memory gave her courage. "Do you remember," she asked Gamira, "when I first sang it to you ?"

"When was it ?" interrupted Adri, not too well pleased at that.

"It was the day we ran away together, and we were frightened. There was a great moon, and the road looked long and white under it. And then we stood beneath a strange short tree on a little hill and I sang to you, and after that we were no more afraid."

"Yes, I remember," murmured Gamira, a little awkwardly. Why couldn't she stop talking and go to sleep ? His mind was full of Adri ; he didn't want to think of anything else. But Phulmat did not seem to notice.

"Oh when to-night is over I shall sleep for months," she cried, and she hid her face in her hands for very weariness.

Adri and Gamira exchanged glances. "We can do nothing?" she whispered.

"No, we must wait," he said. Then silence fell on them, while her strong hands upon his limbs soothed and mastered them.

III

Outside in a black night, the hills blazed everywhere. It was the curse of Gandhi, said the villagers, burning the forest that Government had taken from the people. Julan's house was just visible against the line of fire. How well Bhuta knew that house by now. Every crack that might admit a snake had been filled; the fence had been made doubly strong with thorns; there was a broad clearing all round. But that could not keep out the human snake. Three nights before, Bhuta had crept into the enclosure, right up to the walls of the house, and with infinite care had made a little hole in the wall of Gamira's hut. It had cost him four breathless hours, but he had done it. He had filled up the hole again with mud: they could not have noticed. To-night, he would put a snake through that crack. He smiled as he felt the bundle wriggle in his hand. But that was nothing. The snake would not bite unless it was angered, and that was not likely, for they would all be lying asleep. No,

the snake was only to frighten ; it was the artistic touch that gave dignity to his deed ; it would also protect him if questions were asked about the manner of Gamira's death. His real weapon was the blow-pipe and poison-dart with which he would surely kill his enemy as he lay with his girl in the firelight.

Bhuta crept slowly up the street. He could scarcely walk, so strong was the spirit that possessed him. He felt an intense desire to fling himself on the ground, and wriggle forward on his belly. He felt bizarre, ridiculous, walking upright on his two legs. He wanted to hiss, though he knew that at all costs he must not, and despite himself his tongue kept on darting in and out between his lips. His eyes, cold, dead, expressionless, reptilian, stared through the night.

He crept on up the street. Even as he walked he wriggled. His hips and shoulders writhed to and fro. In Putchi's house someone was singing. Did these people never go to bed ? But Rannu's house was quiet : that was a pretty girl staying there. Her waist swung to and fro like a thin bamboo. Perhaps one day when she was cutting wood—there were possibilities. The snake-eye glistened for a moment, then set again. For a long twelve months he had been chaste, to store up power within him. And at last power was his. He must not lose it now, at the very moment of crisis, even by a thought.

Julan's house loomed dark before him. Suddenly there were quick alert footsteps. Bhuta shrank back, almost curled up, against the wall. Panda Baba went

by, carrying his famous little axe, absorbed, apparently, in some magic. Bhuta hissed under his breath. He knew that all Panda Baba's power was directed against him ; he knew also that it had so far succeeded that there was some obstruction ; he could feel it hemming him round ; for all the strength that was in him, he was not wholly free. But then his face brightened. Not even Parikshit in his tower of brass, he reminded himself, had been able to keep out the avenging snake. It was a good thing no one else in the village knew about Parikshit, or they might have been far more careful. That was his secret and he had kept it well.

He crept round the wall of the enclosure till he found his own secret entrance. Noiselessly he lifted the thorns, and passed inside. He made his way to Gamira's hut. Inside was a low mutter of conversation, and then a girl's clear laugh. Bhuta's hatred stirred again. It was years since a girl had laughed in his house. For a moment he stood tortured with desire and loneliness. Then he put his hand to his pocket and brought out a razor-sharp knife, and began very patiently to remove the mud with which he had filled his crack in the wall. It took a long time, but at last it was done, and he was able to look through. There was still a little firelight, and he could just see Gamira, and apparently two girls in the room. They were none of them asleep ; but one of the girls was sitting up, while Gamira and the other lay side by side near the fire. At the sight of them Bhuta was swept by such a storm of hatred that he found his whole body shaking, little hisses burst from his lips, his tongue shot

in and out with lightning swiftness. With a mighty effort he brought his body into control and then, his fit of weakness passed, he found himself exulting in the grandeur of his hate. He raised himself with the lordly menace of a cobra poised to strike ; he drew the bright sword of his hatred from its sheath, and admired its edge ; he looked upward into the dark starlit sky as though it should rain down yet stronger hate upon him. This was the glory of a man ; this was a greatness that raised him above the animals—any animal could bring its mates and lie sex-mastered and supine by a warm fire. But in his hatred he was a man, kin to the cold stars. The ice-edge of his anger would strike hard and true into that warm stable of beasts before him.

He opened his bag and drew out a long black snake which he fed slowly through the hole in the wall. It vanished from his sight, but almost immediately he heard the gasp of horror that was his signal. Before Gamira could move he put the blow-pipe to his mouth and sent the poisoned dart on its errand of vengeance.

Inside the house, Phulmat had alone been watchful. Ignoring her, Gamira had frankly taken Adri in his arms, burying his face in her warm rounded breasts. Then Phulmat saw a long black line wriggle slowly out of the shadows into the circle of firelight. The glow was so uncertain that at first she wondered if this was not some phantom created by her fears. Then with a gasp of horror she saw that it was real, a snake, and coming towards Gamira. She flung herself forward, and with the axe that she had kept by her side cut the snake in half.

With a dreadful hissing sound, the front part of its body, head erect and tongue darting savagely in and out, rushed forward into the fire.

Gamira leapt up trembling, and Adri fell back almost fainting. Phulmat alone was master of that moment. "It is Bhuta," she cried. "Quick, he must be just outside. Let us catch him." They snatched up brands from the fire and ran out. But though they found the hedge cut and the crack in the wall, of Bhuta there was no sign. With torches high in the air, they ran down to his house, only to find it dark and empty. Panda Baba came running and Tutta put his head out of his hut, blinking at the unusual glare. Panda Baba was delighted. "It is past midnight," he declared. "Nothing can happen now. The power of his magic is gone for ever. But even at its strongest, mine was able to protect you."

Satula was standing in the door when they came back. Panda Baba again repeated his claim, but Satula would have none of it. "It was Phulmat who saved him," she said again and again. As they went into the house she stooped and picked a long thorn out of Phulmat's sari. Something about it caught her attention. She smelt it. "Look," she cried to all of them. "Here is the poisoned dart with which he tried to kill our Gamira. And it was Phulmat who saved him from this also." She glared at Adri, then turned to Gamira. "But of your two enemies, Bhuta is not the worst," she said, and went into her hut.

CHAPTER VIII

A CLOUD THAT'S DRAGONISH

I

A MONTH later, Phulmat was sitting in the courtyard picking over the rice for the evening meal. Little Jiggeri was helping her, though more inclined to talk than to devote herself to business. She was telling Phulmat the story of the hen and the scorpion.

" A hen and a scorpion," she said, " were friends and lived together in a house in the jungle. They used to go here and there, here and there, looking for food, and when they got some they came home and fed their children. One day they went to the threshing-floor, where there were lots and lots of grain. That day the hen got two basketfuls and the scorpion only one. She was very angry and decided to kill her. She said: ' Come along, let's go and get leaves to eat off.' But while they were plucking leaves, the scorpion bit the poor hen. Oh ho, oh ho, how dreadfully it hurt her. She kicked and kicked, and at last she died. Then the scorpion cut her up and tied the bits in the bundle of grain. When she got home all the children came running to greet her, but the hen's children cried:

'Auntie, where is mother?' The scorpion said: 'Your mother has got such a lot of grain that she's coming very slowly. She'll be here before it's dark.'

"After a little while the chicks began to cry. 'Don't cry,' said the scorpion. 'She's sure to come to-morrow.' So she gave them their supper. She made a curry of their mother's body and gave it to them. The eldest chick got her mother's head and legs. . . ."

"But she didn't eat it?" interrupted Phulmat anxiously.

"Wait and I'll tell you. This eldest chick was very clever, and she saw that the head was her mother's. She made them throw their supper away and took her little brothers and sisters home. The scorpion found them crying and said to them: 'Where do you all sleep?' The eldest chick said: 'We sleep here in this corner.' But when bed-time came, she took them to sleep beside the fireplace. In the middle of the night the scorpion went to the corner to kill them, she searched and searched, but couldn't find them, and at last went away.

"In the morning the scorpion came and said: 'To-night I want to bring you a blanket; if you'll tell me where you're sleeping I'll come and give it to you.' 'We're sleeping behind the grindstone,' said the chick. But at night they again slept behind the fireplace. The scorpion came again but couldn't find them. The third night the chicks decided to kill the scorpion themselves. When she asked them where they were sleeping they said that they were going to sleep in the fireplace.

They brought a huge armful of hay and put it there. Then they all went up to the roof. In the middle of the night they heard Aunt Scorpion coming in, and soon she had gone into the fireplace, and was in the middle of the hay. Then the chicks crept down from the roof and set fire to the hay, and the scorpion was burnt to death. I was bitten by a scorpion once," she concluded.

"That's a very good story," said Phulmat, kissing her. "Now you go over to your Auntie Singaru and help her with pounding her *kodon*. This rice is nearly finished." Jiggeri jumped to her feet and ran across the road.

Phulmat leant back against the wall. In the heat of the afternoon there was peace. A few flies buzzed to and fro; she could hear the thud-thud of the rice-pounder in Rannu's house; Satula was heating water for her husband's bath; but most of the village slumbered. Phulmat felt very lazy; this searching for minute stones in the rice tired her eyes; she stopped and leant back against the wall. She could afford to rest.

There was no danger now. Ever since Bhuta's astonishing collapse a month ago, they had breathed freely. How exciting it had been! Bhuta had apparently gone that night to Benipat, and stayed there for two days so that he heard nothing of what had happened. Then on the third morning early he had returned. He had come striding up the village street, strong and confident in his magic, his head held high, eyes flashing, a triumphant smile on his lips, expecting no doubt to hear sounds of mourning in Julan's house. And then he

had met Gamira strong and well. It had been a wonder to see him then, they said. In one brief gasp of dismay his power left him. " It was like turning out a bright lantern," said Julan with heavy satisfaction. " The lantern remains, but it is dirty and useless. The light went out in Bhuta." He had turned and tottered back to his house. He was broken, still venomous, but a mere scorpion now, not a cobra. It was pathetic to see him, now that the strength of hatred had gone out of him ; he crawled about, begging for a little kindness. And he had found it—the headman (who had always hated the Pardhan household) and Dariya (who had not forgiven Panda Baba for his insults) were not sorry to form a faction with him. But his reputation as a *gunia* was gone for ever ; all his patients now came to Panda Baba who had so signally proved the efficacy of his charms ; and the faction was careful to work underground, for they did not want to bring down the wrath of the gods upon them.

But with the disappearance of danger from Bhuta came realization of the other danger close at hand. Adri was still there, and Gamira spread his hands before her ; soon the fire would blaze, and who knew what disaster would follow. In place of the menace of hate had come the menace of love. Adri had not slept with them again since the night of the snake, but Phulmat knew that it was probably only a matter of days before Gamira adopted her as a second wife. Well, that was a common enough thing. Julan had had three wives all at once, Putchi had two—they seemed to get on very well

together. But it was not her style to share her man with another girl; romance was a necessity for her; unless she had everything, what use in having anything at all?

For Adri she felt no hatred, hardly even jealousy. She even loved her a little for her beauty, and liked to do things for her and make her comfortable in small ways. Besides, there was no open breach between Gamira and herself; she slept with him every night; now that she had forgotten her anxieties, she had regained a little of her hold over him. But she knew that while he still loved her, his mind was intoxicated by the colour and warmth of Adri, and she dreaded what might follow. She could never stay on in the house if Adri became his wife.

It was very hot; Phulmat began to feel drowsy; soon she would be asleep. All at once an ant started to walk up her leg, decorously tickling it. She brushed it off. But back it came again, brushing its way through the tiny hairs of her skin, as a man walks through a field of corn. She could not endure that tickling. She was about to kill the ant when it disappeared. It has fallen off, she thought lazily, and there was a short peace. Then, there it was again, higher up, as though it had flown across the intervening space. It was descending now, and again the tickling ceased abruptly, only to restart a little lower down. Phulmat sat up puzzled and looked at her leg. There was the ant, a huge black creature, with large feet. It was nosing about in utter contentment, and tickling maddeningly. Then again

the tickling ceased, but the ant was still there, only she no longer felt it. It walked on—and she felt it again. She took a bit of stick and gently guided the creature to and fro. Slowly it became clear that there was a part of her skin which could feel nothing. It was a long oval patch on the inside of her right leg ; she felt it gently with her hand ; there was no sensation. She looked closely ; yes, there was a slight change of colour ; you could just make out the patch.

Phulmat had lived for three years now in a leper's house ; Satula was her greatest friend ; Julan, who had spent a year in a Leper Home, was well informed about the nature of the disease ; he had often repeated to them some of the lessons that he had learnt in hospital, and in his clumsy way he had tried to protect the other members of the household from infection. Phulmat had often examined the patches on Satula's arms and back. Now she saw that her own patch was exactly similar to those. There was the same lack of sensation, the same discoloration. She was frightened, but she did not realize at once all that this might mean. After all, Satula had had these patches for years, but she was still beautiful, still desired, her fingers were growing a little stiff, that was all. Then Phulmat thought of Julan, and her heart stood still.

Behind the house, Satula was giving her husband his daily bath. He squatted on his knees, leaning well forward, while she washed him all over with warm water. This year, since it had been a bad harvest, they had no soap. But she was rubbing, very tenderly, a

little oil into his deformed and tortured limbs. He was quietly grumbling, but good-naturedly enough.

Phulmat ran to them. "Come quickly," she cried to Satula. "Something is wrong with my leg. Come and look at it."

"In a moment, child," said Julan.

"No, no, no, now, please, don't wait. Do come and look at my leg," she repeated in an agony of impatience.

"What's the matter with the girl?" muttered Julan, but because he loved her, he added to his wife: "All right. I will do nicely now. You go and see to Phulmat —I'll come too in a few minutes when I am dressed."

Satula and Phulmat went into the court together and sat down. Nanas came and stood in front of them, a thumb in his mouth, regarding them solemnly. Satula bent down and gently touched the suspect patch. "Do you feel anything?" she asked.

"No," said Phulmat, trembling.

"Look, you can see the whole patch clearly, and here are some little ridges in the skin just like mine. Oh, it is the same." Her eyes filled with tears. They sat silent, stunned by this calamity. Presently Julan came dragging himself wearily into the court. He too examined the leg and his face went dark with sorrow.

"Yes, that is how I began," he said sadly. "We are all like that at first. We are young then, and there is life in all our limbs; our toes can wriggle in the mud, and our fingers are strong for work or for delight. We think nothing of that little patch. Then other

patches come, and the life dries up in us slowly." He lifted his huge face to hers and looked at the girl, so brimming with vitality and joy. "Slowly the life dries up, as in a flower broken from its stem," he repeated.

She gazed at him in terror. He was like a mirror to her, and she saw her own face in his, her eyes lustreless, the nose flattened, ears pendulous, the brows knitted in a look of intense ferocity. What man would love her then? She would not be fit even for Bhuta. She covered her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

Gamira came in then. Adri was with him, and little Jiggeri with a tiny bundle of wood on her head. They were flushed and excited, and very happy. Satula glared at them through her tear-filled eyes. Phulmat sprang to her feet, and ran to Gamira, flinging her arms round his neck.

"They say I have got it too. What can we do?"

"What have you got?" he asked, startled.

"The great disease, the same as Julan and Satula."

Gamira started back. He took her hands in his, but removed them from his neck, and looked at her.

"How do you know?" he asked breathlessly.

"He says so," she answered, nodding at Julan.

"Yes, it is the beginning," said the old leper solemnly.

They all stood silent for a few moments. They were used to every calamity; the earth betrayed them; the heavens fought against them; yet this disaster seemed to every one of them a thing not to be borne. To Gamira, as he stood there, looking at the lovely girl

who in that moment had become horrible to him, it seemed the end. He would have to look after her when she was old. That was the first thought that flashed through his mind. In a few years she would be hideous, life would be a long torment, she might not even be able to satisfy his desire. He looked then at Julan, and to him too the leper was a mirror—the thickened ears, coarse lips and the appalling devastation of the toes and fingers. His eyes travelled round the circle of bystanders, and now he saw Satula, still perfect in her delicate beauty, but bound for the same goal. He shuddered. Was he in a house of the dead? At last he looked into the clear eyes of Adri and saw a great hope dawning there, in the eyes of the clean fresh fire that was Adri.

Suddenly he felt a horror of his own flesh that had been joined to the leper's body. His spirit shrank inwards from his flesh; it plunged desperately, like a frightened horse, seeking an escape; he wanted to run to the river, plunge into the water, roll in mud, do anything to be clean, clean, clean; his body shook with panic. Julan had given the disease to Satula; now Phulmat would pass it on to him. He saw a long series of years before him; a nightmare sequence of empty years, a life of nightmare. In a flash he decided. He would rid himself of the danger. He began to talk in a very loud voice. He became aggressive, dictatorial. He pushed the girl from him, and she stumbled backwards against Satula.

"You have been to Julan," he shouted at the top of

his voice. "You have ruined my wife," he went on, turning to the old man. "That is how she has become diseased. I will not keep a straying bitch in my house. Away with you, girl. Go to the padris and become a Christian. Not another night do you sleep in my house." His face was working with terror; he looked bestial, hateful.

Phulmat stood like a stone, an intolerable pain possesesd her. In that moment she saw the abyss of utter ruin before her. She was to lose the beautiful body that she loved, that everyone loved. But more than that she was to lose the man whom she had worshipped as her king. She had no words to answer him.

But Satula sprang forward and struck him across the face with her open hand. "You bastard," she cried. "I would kill you if you were a man. When this disaster falls on your beautiful girl, you abuse her instead of giving her comfort. And if you think of making my king your cuckold, you know perfectly well, and everyone else knows, that he has not been able to go near a woman these last five years. So go and drown yourself in the tank with your pert whore. That is why you are behaving like this, because you want a new wife. Aren't you ashamed to stand before us?"

Even Julan growled like the lion he was, and little Nanas glared defiance on behalf of his beloved Phulmat. But Gamira was absorbed in his own fear; he hardly noticed; he even forgot that he had allowed a woman to strike him, a thing which might cost him all his

tribal privileges. He came a step nearer Phulmat and said: "Go. Take your clothes and ornaments and vessels, and go back to your father's house. This is my fault for taking an old man's leavings."

And pompous and pitiful in the smallness of his fears, he stalked into the house.

II

The evening of that day was wild, and there was a strong high wind. From the forest came a steady roaring, as the trees bent under the gale. Phulmat, a bundle of clothes and a few vessels and some food in a basket on her head, and some of Satula's ornaments as well as all her own on her throat and arms, stood on the crest of the hill above the village, looking down upon the forest. The vast life below her stirred her blood. The Spirit of the Wind was abroad, Pawan Dassorie the Wind, that had caught the primal atoms and whirled them together into solid earth, the Wind that had blown back the flames that licked at Rai Linga's body on the day of his great trial, the Wind that was the ally of all wild things warning them of danger to come. Then up from the forest he came, Pawan Dassorie with flowing locks streaming behind him; he caught her hair and it danced ecstatically in his embrace, he rode upon her, she surrendered her body to that onslaught; dropping her bundle, she flung out her arms in greeting. The Spirit rode upon her. Her wrongs were forgotten in

that moment of wild rapture, the unseen glorious spirit of the wind possessed her. Now she was indeed as the wind is; homeless like the wind, and free as the wind. If only she could be invisible, and liberated from all feeling and all love, then she would wander gloriously over the face of the wide earth.

Then the gust passed, and she found herself not spirit only, but flesh, a weary anxious child of twenty. Where was she to sleep that night? Her father's house was thirty miles away; she dreaded both the pity and the questions of the villagers. Her sorrows crowded back upon her, and she sank down exhausted and miserable, and her heart poured out its tears.

Then came the Panjabi out of the forest, a neat little bundle of wood on his shoulders. She looked up and saw his handsome, almost cultured face, the face of a man who had himself wandered on the heels of some great wind; she saw too his eager vigorous body, well covered in neat clothes. They had always been friends; Phulmat had usually preferred to take her friends outside her tribe, and there was a breadth and variety in the Panjabi mind that appealed to her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, the hard lips smiling now. His voice spoke of the wind too, surely the wind was riding him; he looked exultant.

"What is the matter?" he asked again.

"He has driven me out," she answered simply.

At once the spirit in him was a high wind that stirred all the forest of his desire.

"Then come and rest in my house," he said boldly,

staking everything on the chance of surprising her into acquiescence.

She gasped at the audacity of it. If she was seen in his house, now, everyone would accuse her—at the least they would say she had eaten with him, and that would mean ruin.

"My sister is with me," he said. "She will look after you." Would he, he wondered, be able to win her in a single night; perhaps not, but he could try. "Wait here beneath these trees," he went on, "till it is dark. Then when no one sees, come round the back of the village to my house. My sister will have food for you"—she shook her head—"or if you won't eat with us, she will prepare wheat and vegetable and you can cook it. Early before cock-crow, you can be gone. No one will know. Why should you have a night of cold?"

The spirit had left him now; he was just a small schemer, planning a chance night of pleasure. The tempest of the wind had left his body. She felt unutterably dreary; but she nodded assent. His sister would be there; there would be less curiosity and fewer questions in his house than in any other; it would be warm, and there would be food; and no one need know.

So she went and waited underneath the trees that looked out across the forest far below, while the man turned and walked quickly to his house.

III

But when the night came, there was no sister in the house ; and in her food was a drug that made her sick and unutterably drowsy. Besides, he was a man, and strong ; and all her resistance was broken down in the waves of sleep that passed over her. She was not half conscious when he forced his will upon her.

CHAPTER IX

DARK ENCOUNTER

I

SLOWLY the stars faded. A cock proclaimed the day, another and another. The feet of cattle pounded the village street. There was a discordant clash of cow-bells and the cries of children. At last a tiny tentacle of sunlight crept through the window, caught Phulmat's tangled hair, and touched her eyes. She stirred a little, then slept again. More sunlight came, now a broad beam resting on her face. At last she woke, but awake was only half aware. She was in a strange house, her head throbbed painfully, her mouth was dry and parched, and she still felt so drowsy that she could hardly move. And then she remembered. She was in the Panjabi's house. She looked at the sunlight in horror. That touch of radiance might mean ruin for her. She sprang from the bed, and with trembling hands began to dress. There was no sign of the Panjabi; probably he was sleeping in the inner room. That did not matter: before her was the door. She went to it and listened. The full business of the light was on in the village street. She could hear the shrill cries of children and the rougher

talk of men. What was she to do ? To be caught in the Panjabi's house meant being put out of the tribe ; she would be the talk of every village ; it would be the end of any hope of a return to Gamira. What had happened to her in the night she was not certain ; there was a cloud over her mind as well as an aching pain within it. She had only one clear thought—to get away. And that was her undoing .

Had she remained in the house till midday, she could have made her escape unobtrusively, as a casual visitor. But to leave the house now, with the door shut, before the sun was a bamboo's length above the sky, was to throw herself into the arms of ruin. But in the stress of the moment, she lost her head. She undid the chain, which clanked down to its full length, opened the stiff old door, which swung out with a horrid groaning noise, and stepped out into the street.

A few yards away, on the verandah of the headman's house, placidly smoking an early morning pipe, sat Bhuta. As Phulmat hurried past him, her sari lifted across her face, he made no sign, but as she glanced at him she could read triumph in his eyes.

II

" Hey, gammer Julan ! Hey, gammer Julan ! "

Tutta was standing in a frenzy of agitation outside the leper's house.

" What is it, you fool of a cripple ? What is it, you

crooked and impotent bastard ? " came the deep lion tones of Julan. The old man had never liked Tutta.

" May I come in ? I must speak to you."

This was too much. To have a visit from Tutta, and at this hour of the morning ! But there was something in the boy's voice that checked Julan's rising temper.

" Very well, come in," he roared. There must be news ; perhaps his bullocks had been taken to the pound.

Tutta lurched across the threshold, and sat down inside the court.

" Where is Gamira ? " he asked.

" He and Adri have gone away for a time to the forest," said the old man with a slow smile, " but to what village I know not. I dare say they also will not trouble overmuch about its name."

Tutta brushed away this trifling with a wave of his claw hand. " Haven't you heard what has happened ? " he said breathlessly.

" Happened ? To whom ? "

" To Phulmat."

" No, I have heard nothing. The sun is hardly up. And I am not an old woman to start gossiping even before I have taken my morning meal."

" She slept last night with the Panjabi——"

Julan started and his face grew sombre and heavy, but he said nothing.

" And Bhuta saw her as she was going out of the house."

Julan was interested enough now. As the arbiter of tribal customs for the last thirty years, he knew well what

this would mean, not only to Phulmat but to the whole family. "Was she mad," he roared, "to go out of the house while he was about?"

"I think she is a little crazed in her wits since that whoreson dog Gamira drove her from the house. But mad or not, Bhuta saw her. And he's been going round the village blowing all the fires of hatred against her. Putchi and that crawling insect of a Panka Dariya who eats the constable's dung, and Hothu the Baiga and the Ahir, and nearly all the women who have always been jealous of her."

"And why should Pankas and Baigas concern themselves with our affairs? And who are you, you scab, you scald, you clown, to call Gamira a whoreson dog?"

"You are a scab and a scald yourself," retorted Tutta. "Why do flies concern themselves with dung? Because they like the smell of it. And the whole village laughs when there is a dirty smell in the house of Julan."

The old man was cold now as ice. He sat silent for a moment. Then: "And what does this herd of gelded bullocks plan to do to the old lion and his child?" he asked acidly.

"They will drag her to the centre of the village, and they will put chili——"

"Not till I've dishonoured their Christian mothers," suddenly roared Julan again, beginning to struggle to his feet. "Where is the girl? Take me to her at once. I'll give 'em chili! I'll beard 'em, I'll——"

He was interrupted by a loud shouting down the

street, and at the same time began the insistent throbbing of a drum. At once Satula dashed out of the kitchen, where, hidden, she had been listening to the conversation. " Come, we must go immediately," she cried.

Then there was a loud shriek and the wild clatter of women's voices. For a moment Tutta so far forgot the urgency of the crisis as to give a connoisseur's grin of approval at the quality of the *gali*, then with a strangled shout he too turned to the door.

" Come along," he yelled, and lumbered out into the street.

" Satula, come," roared the old lion, and tottered after him on his stumps. But Satula first ran back into the kitchen and came out again with a blazing log of wood in her hands. Nanas and Jiggeri, beside themselves with excitement, came after her, but did not go farther than the verandah, where they stood watching the scene.

Before Rannu's house the battle was now set. Bhuta had dragged Phulmat out into the street, and three women were holding her. Tigli and Singaru were standing in their doorway, screaming abuse with the utmost power of their voices. Putchi, rather bloated and heavy-eyed after a long debauch the previous night, had a dish of red chili in his hand, and was trying to appear the embodiment of tribal respectability. Hothu was beating the drum. Dariya was looking anxiously about to see which party would be the stronger, before he took sides. The other villagers were standing round, some near at hand, and others who wanted to see the

fun but did not want to make enemies of Julan, at a little distance. Neither Tiblu nor Tok Singh were there; they had both gone to the forest for wood. As the rescue party approached from one side, Panda Baba came hurrying up from the other, and at once, as befitted an ecclesiastic, began to explore the avenues of conference and conciliation with the headman. At the same time, Singaru ran forward and flung her arms round Phulmat, declaring that whatever happened she would protect her. These events diverted attention from Julan's party which came up quietly and took the enemy unexpectedly in the rear.

Tutta, lurching along on one leg, led the way. With his claw he knocked the chili out of Putchi's hand and crushed it into the ground with one convulsive indignant stamp of his foot. Satula, laughing out loud with the sheer joy of revenge, thrust her burning firebrand full into Bhuta's posterior, and there was a roar of pain and the smell of burning cloth. The engagement then became general. Julan was in the middle of the crowd, roaring deeply. " If I bite you," he cried, " then your hands and feet will drop off like mine." They scattered before him. Old Rannu, arms and legs jerking in all directions, flung himself on Dariya whom he had hated for years, but the Panka's pretty wife ran to the rescue, and catching the old man by the hair, threw him to the ground. Singaru and Tigli attacked the women who were holding Phulmat. She herself was standing quite still as if indifferent to her surroundings, and her friends were unable to free her for, after the first shock

of surprise was over, Bhuta's party rallied. Bhuta himself knocked the burning log out of Satula's hands and with a vigorous push sent her flying on to the side of the road. Then with a resounding thwack, Putchi knocked Panda Baba down, a deed which cost him many a sleepless night wondering what magic the old *gunia* would put upon him. There were now only Julan and Tutta in action among the men, and it seemed as though several other villagers would join in on the opposite side, when relief came from an unexpected quarter.

Plump! a boiling hot brinjal struck Putchi fairly in the face and burst, spreading itself neatly all over those gross features. Plump! One of the women holding Phulmat jumped aside with a cry of dismay and gazed ruefully at a spoilt sari. Dariya, opening his mouth to let out the ripest oath in his store, found it filled instead with a red-hot missile, that kept him quiet for several minutes.

Satula had been preparing brinjals for dinner, cooking them whole in water. When she ran out of the house, they had just come nicely to the boil, and Nanas and Jiggeri, casting about for missiles with which to take their share in the battle, decided to use these. Nanas picked up the pot, while Jiggeri caught hold of some broad green leaves so that they could hold the brinjals without getting burnt themselves. Then they ran out together, went round to the back of Rannu's house, and climbed on to the roof. Jiggeri now took the pot, and Nanas, protecting his hand with the leaves,

picked out the brinjals one by one, and with remarkable accuracy threw them at the enemy.

Just at that moment, Rannu, who had thought it safest to remain on the ground where he had been thrown, managed to kick Hothu's legs away from under him, and Panda Baba jumped to his feet and began to utter such appalling threats that most of the onlookers who were still undecided as to which side they should support, began to move uneasily away. Singaru seized a good handful of hair from one of the women holding Phulmat, and Tigli spat violently in the face of another and kicked her in the stomach. Two more brinjals hit Putchi, one of them again in his face, and Julan threw himself on him, half blinded as he was, crying out that he would bite him. The sudden recovery succeeded. The enemy wavered, then broke its ranks. Putchi jumped desperately out of Julan's reach, who himself fell heavily to the ground. Then Putchi made for his house. But just as he got there, his own consecrated and castrated pig came nosing through the door. He failed to see it, and took a glorious toss over its back. Dariya followed screaming for water to cool his mouth, and pursued by a flood of *gali* from the expert lips of Tigli. The others melted away, and only Bhuta was left, the smell of burnt cloth still about him.

Satula, on her feet again, rushed at him, and clasped his arms to his side, holding him there. Tutta shouted to Nanas: "Throw at him, throw at him." Roaring with laughter, the two children plunged their hands recklessly into the pot, and drew out missile after missile,

which they hurled with force and accuracy at Bhuta, while their mother hid behind him and Singaru clasped his legs. Soon his head and chest and arms were covered with steaming vegetable, but the girls could not hold him for long and he broke away and ran down the street into the headman's house, where that much injured man was having his damages assessed and repaired by both his wives.

Julan was still on the ground, and Satula ran to him and helped him to his feet. He breathed heavily, but with deep satisfaction. Panda Baba was less pleased. He had been knocked down, for the first time in his life; still worse he had been ignored by both parties. He went in silence to his house. But Julan gave a deep chuckle of amusement. With considerable difficulty he produced four annas, and turned to Tutta.

"Little cripple," he said almost affectionately. "Go and get two bottles of wine."

III

In the general excitement, Phulmat was forgotten. Her position had been in no way improved by her rescue. It was true that she was now free from direct physical violence, but she was automatically outcasted by her association with the Panjabi, and her excommunication could hardly have been more publicly proclaimed. On the other hand, several of the villagers would be outcasted also for allowing themselves to be

beaten by women in the struggle. Bhuta would have to give a tribal dinner, and so would the Gond woman whose hair Satula had torn, for Gonds must not let themselves be humiliated by Pardhans. But they could clear themselves by paying a small fine and giving a dinner to the village. You could never be forgiven for going to a Panjabi, a Mussalman, a Christian. She herself would be out of the tribe for her whole life.

Directly her assailants scattered, Phulmat ran up the road, past her own house, past Sitaram's, on up the hill, till she reached the broad plateau with the stumpy trees, where a great wind was always blowing. There again she sat on the edge of the cliff, as she had done yesterday, that yesterday which seemed centuries old, and prayed to Pawan Dassorie, the brave young Spirit of the Wind, to restore her love to her. She did not weep; she did not even feel angry, accepting the ugly scene that had just passed as an inevitable retribution; it was written in her forehead; she was possessed by only one thing, her longing for Gamira. But Pawan Dassorie only sang loudly in her ears and ran away, bending the trees before him, across the mountains, away to the farthest reaches of the forest. Then came Hatya Matya, his servant the whirlwind in a tall pillar of dust, sweeping up all the leaves and rubbish in its path, and tossing them high into the air. And then Pawan Dassorie again in the tops of the stunted trees behind her. "Follow me," he seemed to whisper. "Follow me away across the hills. Why do you sit weeping here? There is no more blessedness for you here." And he

was gone, up, up, up into the sky above her. Cleansed by the wind, she rose to her feet. She felt strong again, and without a tremor walked down into the village.

The street was deserted save for the headman's pig, nosing busy and unconcerned among all that mess of spent vegetable. The defeated were nursing their wounds and planning revenge indoors; the victors were already half drunk in Julan's house. As she passed the door, Phulmat could hear the old man hiccoughing joyfully over his assault on Putchi. Forlorn, but not afraid, she went on towards the well. Suddenly a voice hailed her.

"Where are you going, girl?"

It was Tutta, standing in the door of his hut, a little apprehensive, but smiling at her.

"But why aren't you in my uncle's house, drinking with the others?" she asked, stopping at once.

"Because I was frightened about you, what you would do. I couldn't drink while you were like that. I felt very bad."

For the first time that day, Phulmat felt like crying. She came nearer to him. "Then have you at least got a home for me?" she asked.

His heart jumped with an astonished joy. "You may have my house, of course," he said. "I'll sleep across the doorway and protect you." He gurgled nervously. "You needn't be afraid of me. I am not a man who tumbles every girl he meets."

Phulmat burst out laughing. "O yes, I'm sure like every other man in this village you'll think of me as a

sister." Tutta looked wounded. "No, I don't mean that," she went on hurriedly. "I'm not afraid of anyone, not even Bhuta, since he was driven away by a child like Nanas. And I will stay with you until I run away for ever."

Was there ever such joy as Tutta's? He took her into his house, this queen, and spread his tattered rags and a bit of sacking as for a throne. "I will sleep a little," she said after a time, "and you go and get vessels and some things from Panda's house. To-day I'll cook for you." She lay down on the ground, and was at once asleep. Tutta stood for a long while gazing at her, hardly daring to breathe. Very childlike and innocent she looked, lying there among his rags; she seemed to recapture her virginity in sleep. Her dark mauve sari covered her whole body, but one hand lay open to his sight. He thought of stooping down and kissing it, but perhaps it was safer not. Besides, he was no sentimentalist. All the same he was trembling with excitement when he went across to Panda's house and asked the old mother for a cooking-pot.

"And what will ye do, ye handless creature, with a cooking-pot?"

"She is staying with me," he stammered.

"Married are ye? What girl is fool enough. . . ."

"No, I'm not married. I don't want that pleasure," said Tutta loudly to encourage himself. "Phulmat is staying in my house for some days, and she will cook for me."

"Oh, the Panjabi girl," said the old woman. She

chuckled. " I said it was only a fool that would live with you, and I'm right. Very well. Here's a pot for the rice, and here's a little pot for dal, and here's "—she went to the huge earthen bin in one corner of the room—" and here's rice, and some dal—yes, it was a good thought to give the poor child shelter—you are not such a fool as she is—will she let you sleep with her, I wonder—and here is an onion or two—she's very pretty —some salt—you'll be lucky if you get her—here, take the things, hold up your dhoti." Tutta lifted a corner of his loin-cloth and she poured all the things into its various folds, he carefully separating each one. " Wait," she cried as he turned to go. " Here is some chili—for another use this time." She gave a ghoulish chuckle. Tutta did not respond.

Phulmat cooked their meal, improved by some *ghee* and part of the goat which had been killed to celebrate the victory. Singaru, not more than slightly drunk, had brought it for them. As she did so, Phulmat talked to Tutta about Gamira.

" His name is a golden ring to me," she said. " I will always wear it on my finger. He was my king; he was my man. . . ."

" If I had my way, he would not be a man for long," muttered Tutta, not caring much for this talk.

" Stop that," she said angrily. " I tell you, he is my king. He is bewitched. It is not the first time. Bhuta's hatred is again pursuing us."

Tutta looked up at her, not a little frightened. " Don't be angry," he said; " it was for your sake I said it."

"Then for my sake never say such things again," she answered. She got up, and went and stood in the door with her back to him. The dal in the pot foamed and bubbled. She stood there so long that he was frightened. He too rose and timidly touched her with his claw. She shook him off impatiently, but came and sat by the fire again.

"Tutta, he is my life and I love him more than any man. Is that enough for you?"

"Yes," he murmured, humbled.

CHAPTER X

MAIDENS LOTH

I

THE next morning, Singaru came, and for a time the two friends wept together, according to their custom, but Singaru was too anxious to tell her own troubles to wait for long.

"Yesterday, while they were all drinking," she said, "and I was alone in the house, he came to see me"—Phulmat knew that she meant Tok Singh—"and he said that I must decide whether I would run away with him or no; because if I wouldn't have him, he was going to the tea-gardens."

"And Tiblu?"

"Tiblu is a fool. He looks at me, and looks, but cannot say a word. So I don't know whether he really loves me or not. And he is the slave of his father who is always talking about the girl at Benipat and bringing back the milk. But what have we to do with such old customs in these days? I would like to beat Tiblu, he's such a fool."

Phulmat had always favoured Tok Singh, though Satula and nearly everyone else supported Tiblu, so she

said eagerly : " I think I would go with Tok Singh. He is a strong boy."

" But how can we run away ? We have no money, and I've not even any ornaments. All mine were sold last year to pay the cattle-tax and that fine we had for stealing wood."

Phulmat sat silent for a time, then turned shining eyes towards her friend.

" Listen," she said. " There is a man in Chakmaktola who gives money for ornaments." Singaru nodded ; that was where they had taken hers. " You must take all I have—for I've no need of finery now—and go to him and get the money. Tutta will take you : he knows the man well."

Before she could stop her, Phulmat had begun to remove the *karanphul* from her ears, the little gold *nathni* from her nose, the silver *tora* with their score of tiny bells from her ankles, two silver bangles from her wrists. Only round her neck she kept the heavy silver *hasli* and on her finger the gold ring, for these were Gamira's gifts to her when they first ran away together.

" You see this *karanphul*," she said, holding it up. " It was given me by a Gond boy in the forest, the first who ever loved me. And the *nathni* and *tora* were given me by the old man, my husband. And the bangles were given me by—oh, it doesn't matter, a friend of mine long ago, before I met Gamira. Take all of them to Chakmaktola, and I will sit here and think what we had better do. The first thing is to have money."

Two days later, Singaru returned with Tutta. She

came into the hut, and closed the door. Then very carefully she undid the folds of her sari, and brought out the money.

"How much did you get?" asked Phulmat anxiously.

"Wait, I'll tell you," said Singaru. She could not count more than twenty, and so business was a difficult matter. She slowly counted out a heap of ten rupees, then another heap, and finally put four rupees together. To this she added a four-anna piece, a two-anna piece and two annas. Phulmat looked this over. "How much is it?" asked Singaru.

"It is not enough," said Phulmat, not wanting to reveal the fact that she too could not count.

"He gave five rupees for the *dhar*, and six rupees for the *nathni*, and three rupees for the bangles, and the rest for the *tora*."

"We have been deceived, but what can we do? It is written in our fate. But at least there will be enough for you to run away with. Now listen. To-night you must go. This morning Putchi went with Dariya to the police station—Tiblu has gone with them—and they will spend the night there. Tok Singh's mother has already gone on a visit to her sister's house in Bijori. His father is doing *gunia* in Sitaram's house. In the evening your mother always sits to talk with Julan. Your father is still resting after that fight. You can easily escape as the sun sinks. When it is not more than a bamboo's length above the hills, take your water-pot and say you are going to the river to fetch water. I will also take a pot and come with you. Tok Singh will be

waiting in the trees on the far bank. You can easily escape from there when it gets dark."

All day Phulmat was in a fever of excitement. Towards evening Tok Singh came to the hut and Phulmat gave him a bundle with Singaru's clothes and some food. He went on down to the river. It began to get late. Phulmat ran up the street and went into Rannu's house. There was no one to be seen, but she went to the back, and there she found Singaru sitting against the wall behind the house.

"Come, girl, come quickly."

"No, I can't. I'm frightened. I've never been to a man."

"Oh, come along." Phulmat was exasperated. She caught her hand and pulled her up, and then dragged her through the house. Singaru took her pot and followed slowly. At the corner of the street she stopped. Phulmat, who had gone ahead, ran back.

"Are you mad?" she asked. "Why don't you walk properly, as if you were really going to fetch water?"

They went a little farther, and then Singaru stopped again. A snake had wriggled across the road in front of her, leaving a thin line in the dust.

"The path is cut," she exclaimed. "I can't go any farther. I have never been to a man. Not yet. After a few months we will go." She threw her water-pot on the ground, smashing it to fragments, and ran back to the house.

II

For a long time that night, Phulmat lay awake rubbing her leg, wondering what she should do. In the faint light of a quarter-moon that came fitfully through the cracks in the wall, she could see the squalor and misery of the little hut. Across the door, Tutta was lying on his back, breathing noisily, with a hideous dribbling sound. The place smelt of unwashed clothes and stale tobacco. In the neighbouring house she could hear Tok Singh, with a few friends, shouting drunken defiance at the pangs of despised love. Phulmat thought of Gamira, strong, clean, beautiful. At this very moment he must be in Adri's arms. A thrill went through her as she thought of that encounter. She began to think of the forest, and the light coming through the moving branches overhead. She saw again the well where she had first met Gamira, and felt the cold wet rope against her hands and the weight of the bucket. And she saw the moon and the stars of the night when they ran away together. How clean their house had always been, smelling only of the pungent smoke of the wood-fires or the rich fragrance of their cooking. Her eyes fell on Tutta's hat, that ruined and battered dignity ; she looked at the pathetic rags on which she was sleeping. A rat ran across the room, and in the roof above a loud squeaking told of a tryst fulfilled. She sat up. In the corner was a bundle, a sari, some food and vessels. Singaru should

have taken them. They spoke of a journey. They were prepared, ready for the road, longing to be away.

She was on her feet, moving so softly a mouse need not be frightened of her. Then, picking up the bundle, she stepped carefully over the unconscious Tutta, lifted the bamboo frame that did service for a door, and was out in the faintly moonlit street. It was too dangerous for her to go, as she should, down the road to the foot of the hill, then round and away through the forest. She could not take that way by night. But in one of the fields under the lee of the hill, there was a rough shelter where people slept when they were guarding the crops ; she could sleep there. Then at dawn she could be away and far off in the forest before anyone roused themselves to chase her. For chase her they would. She might be in disgrace, but she was also a very beautiful girl, and the young men of the village were not going to give her up to some distant hamlet of the lowlands.

When she awoke, the hill above her was ringed with white mist. The road left the warm and homely fields, and plunged into the dark cold forest, a forest that crowded a narrow pass between hills and then broadened and lengthened into a vast ocean of trees. She made four miles before sunrise. Then she came to a river, where she washed her hands and feet, and breaking a twig, cleaned her teeth and mouth. She picked some berries and ate them, drank the clear water of the stream and rested for a little while on the bank. The words of one of her songs came to her, and she began to sing.

On the bank of the river grow the rushes, my beloved.
O how could you forget those hours among the rushes?
If a man deserts his love, they both know sorrow.

She could only express herself in song, that was her art. And then to hearten herself, as she went along, she sang again, little songs of sorrow that somehow took the pain out of her heart and cast it to the wind. The narrow forest-path gleamed white through the trees; they called it the sadhu's loin-cloth, for it was never burnt by the great fires that swept the forest, just as the sadhu was untouched by the fires of passion. Along that path, always just ahead of her, went Pawan Dassorie; he was waiting to catch her songs; they were her offering to him.

But by midday the wind had gone up to its sky-dwelling, and only the hot sun beat down through the trees on to the path. She was very tired now, and there seemed no end to her journey. She had met no one, and had not come within sight or sound of a village. But after a time the path widened into a road, and she knew that she would come before long to a shelter. She sat down on a bank by the roadside to rest. Suddenly she heard footsteps. She looked up, and saw a sadhu walking along the road towards her. Singaru would at once have run away into the jungle, but Phulmat was too tired and too curious to do that. Instead she covered her face with her sari, and watched him very carefully as he approached. He was a tall thin man, with a little beard, and he did not look like an ordinary sadhu, for

he wore a long brown cloak, held together at the waist by a white cord the end of which dangled at one side.

When he came nearer Phulmat could see his face more clearly. It was a long, thin, grey face, very luminous, and his eyes sat far back in their hollows, like holy men squatting in the depths of caves. They were true sadhu eyes, and now they were looking at her, looking too as no other man had ever looked. When he saw her sitting lonely and evidently sad, he stopped, and rather timidly looked towards her.

"What are you doing here all alone in the forest?" he asked.

"I am a leaf blown to and fro by the wind," she answered, without a trace of shyness or affectation.

He was startled by that answer. "And has the leaf then no tree to cling to?" he asked, dropping easily into her own idiom.

"No, this leaf is fallen, and there are new green leaves on its tree."

"And had the tree no fruit?" he asked gently.

"None," she said, covering her mouth with her sari.

"And now your heart is full of pain?" he asked again. How beautifully he spoke their jungle talk, she thought.

"A man may kill his enemy," she answered. "But no one can destroy such sorrow as mine."

"Will you tell me about it?" he said, still standing before her, hardly looking at her, but interested, inter-

ested in her, the real Phulmat who was not just a beautiful body for the enjoyment of young men, but someone who thought and suffered. "Will you tell me?" he repeated.

"What is there to tell?" she asked. "You are a big sadhu. What can my little trouble have to do with you?"

"Listen," he said, suddenly sitting down on his heels. "In the bazaar the merchant sells rice, dal, tobacco and matches, salt and onions and spices. Is it not so?"

She nodded.

"And whether your needs are small or great, you go to him?"

"Yes."

"And he is glad to serve you, even if it be for one pice worth of salt?"

"Certainly, if he is wise, for out of many pice grow a rupee."

"Exactly. And I am also a merchant, but I deal in sorrows and troubles. So I would buy your sorrows from you and put them in my shop, which is my heart."

This is a strange man, she thought. What is he coming to? "What price do you pay?" she asked.

"I will give you something that will cure you of sorrow—not money," he added hastily, as he saw a tiny shadow of alarm cross her face.

This man must be a big *gunia*, she thought to herself. He must be a Christian *gunia*. He must be a good one,

for he doesn't seem to want to seduce me. Probably there are some good Christians in spite of all the harm they do. Perhaps he can cure me. So she began her tale, showed him her leg with that cruel patch, described her banishment, the fight in the village, her escape.

He looked at the leg for a long time. "Will you go to hospital?" he asked.

"Perhaps I might," she said, disappointed. Was that all he could do? He couldn't be very powerful, after all.

"You have given me two sacks of trouble to put in my shop, your disease and your banishment. I will not forget. And in payment for your wares, I will give you a charm, a charm of all comfort."

From his pocket he drew out a rosary, with a crucifix hanging from it. "You know what this is?" he asked.

"A sadhu's rosary?" she guessed.

"Yes, but here is the charm. Do you see, on this wood is the image of a man nailed to it."

"Yes, but I don't understand."

"He is Bara Deo, the Great God, who came to earth to do good to men, to heal the sick and to teach them to love one another. And at last, because he protected the poor and used to eat with those who were decasted, he too was banished, and his enemies nailed him to a great tree and left him to hang there till he died."

"Like this?" she said, incredulous, opening her arms.

" Yes, and he died in great pain. But his love was so great that in spite of that pain he had no hatred or anger, and that love of his has lasted for hundreds of years. It can never die. For if love is strong enough it cannot die and in the end it is victorious. He died for his friends, and there is nothing greater than that."

" Will my love for him be like that ? "—she jerked her head back along the path by which she had come.

" Yes, if your love is perfect. So keep this with you, and when you suffer, think that God too has suffered, and does suffer with you."

He put the crucifix in her hands, and she at once raised it to her lips and kissed it. Then she undid, with some difficulty, the little bag that hung from the *hasli* round her neck, took out the two rupees and three annas that were in it, and tied these in a knot at one corner of her sari, put the charm into the bag, and slipped it back into its place where it hung between her breasts. The sadhu stood watching till she had finished.

" Now I must go," he said, " for I have far to travel, and I have to carry the weight of those two big sacks of yours." He got up, smiled at her, and without a word more was gone.

She stood up to watch him. Is he himself a spirit ? she asked herself ; he cared nothing for me. She watched his tall, brown-clad figure moving down the road, but then at the corner where he would vanish into the forest he hesitated, seemed to struggle with himself, then

turned back and looked at her, as she stood in the middle of the road, a straight pillar of mauve and golden brown against the dark green of the trees.

" Ah," she said, " he is a man after all. But nevertheless his charm may do some good."

She felt much refreshed, and went on her way singing loudly a vulgar marriage song.

CHAPTER XI

STARRY JEALOUSY

Now there were golden days for Gamira. When he and Adri returned home from their forest honeymoon, they found that the others had gone on a long visit to Gora-kanari—Satula's home—to give a tribal dinner which would readmit them to the privileges they had lost on account of Phulmat's association with the Panjabi. Even Julan had gone, carried on a litter. Their absence meant peace, and the two lovers were glad to have the house to themselves. Directly they got home Tiblu came and told them all that had happened in their absence. Tok Singh, furious and sulky in his disappointment, had been very rude to Tigli, and Singaru had refused to speak to him for days. On the other hand she had begun to be unusually friendly to Tiblu, whose pleasant, happy disposition, which at other times she found a little insipid, was now at a premium. Gamira and Adri determined to give him what help they could. They were all very happy together.

But after a month the others returned. Julan quickly reconciled himself to the new order of things. He thought the less of Gamira for sending away Phulmat ;

he missed her curries ; there was no doubt that she had been the most charming girl in their world. But that was no reason why they shouldn't be happy with Adri, who from the beginning had been wise enough to look to the old man's little comforts and to treat all his oracles with respect. Between Satula and Adri, however, there were perpetual quarrels, in which even the children joined. Gamira did not bother much about that, though he was sometimes a little uneasy on another score—after all, Adri was a married girl, and sooner or later her husband would make trouble.

Satula did everything she could to foster quarrels between Gamira and Adri. She could not forgive them. One day when they were all out in the fields, and only Julan was sitting in a peaceful doze on the front verandah, she began to prepare a charm that would bring trouble between the two. She went out to the great tree that hung above the well, where countless crows had their nests, and gathered a small bundle of crows' feathers. Tigli, she knew, had some porcupine quills in her house —and what was more she knew where to find them. It was an easy matter to slip in and remove three of them. Then she went home and sat down over the fire. She had never done such a thing before, and she felt very frightened. Whatever would happen to her now? Perhaps she would become like old Tiharu, and live on rats and crows, and drink blood and be able to change her shape at will. Once, she remembered, when they were fetching wood from the forest, Tiharu had turned into a tigress and had hidden in a bush and thrown

stones at them, growling, till they were all frightened out of their wits. And another day, when an old lover had come to see her, she had transformed herself into a young and lovely girl for his pleasure. Would she become like that? And in the end be drowned in the witches' well at Tonhichua—it wasn't very far away. She trembled with fear and excitement. But she couldn't stop now. She stirred the fire so that the flames leapt up, and threw a couple of small sharp nails into the blaze. "Sharp are ye, and sharp may they be," she muttered. Then when the flames had died down, and the fire had begun to smoke, she tied the feathers and the quills into a little bundle, and held them there. She was not sure what she ought to say at this point, for she was not really a witch at all, so she just mumbled as impressively as she could. Then when her bundle was well smoked, she slipped across the courtyard to Gamira's hut, and tied it well under the eaves, as far up as she could so that it would not be noticed. Now, she thought, there is certain to be trouble.

And the very next day there was. Satula and Julan were on the verandah with the children, and they were having a heated argument about the proper way to keep Nanas's hair short. Julan favoured the old-fashioned method of chopping off the ends with an axe, which he said would also make the boy more manly. Satula thought it was better to burn it, very slowly, till it was the correct length. Then a small, dark-bearded man stood on the threshold.

"What do you want?" asked Julan without further

greeting, for though he could see that the visitor was a Pardhan, he disliked being interrupted.

" My own property," replied the man.

" And what property of yours is here ? " asked Julan, though he already suspected the answer.

Suddenly the man seemed to lose all control ; he began to wave his arms ; a fit of trembling took him. " Where is my wife ? " he shouted. " Where is that girl I cared for from childhood, giving her the best clothes, saris worth five rupees from Bilaspur, and the best food that this land of rascals has ever seen ? Where is that bastard who has stolen her ? "

" So it is the old man," muttered Julan to himself. " Of course, he was bound to come." Aloud he said : " Don't trouble yourself so greatly. Come and sit down. The young man and the girl are in the fields and they will be here soon. My sister's nephew lives in your village, I think. How are they ? "

Adri's husband came and sat down, but he was not to be diverted. " My property ! " he grumbled. " My property ! And stolen ! Now I'm laughed at by all the young men in the village, who say she ran away because vigour had perished from my loins."

Satula, who had run into the house at his arrival, now came and stood behind them, her hand on the pillar of the door. She was glad the man had come. " You are right," she said. " It was a shameful deed for our Gamira to drive away his beautiful wife, and take this useless girl into the house. You will do well to carry her away. We don't want her."

"Be quiet, woman," thundered Julan, who certainly did not want to lose Adri. "Why should she go with this old black bull. Our Gamira is young and handsome; they will have good sons who will care for me in my old age."

"My Nanas isn't good enough for you," she retorted. "And what do you call yourself now? A young virgin boy, I suppose. You are after Adri yourself." And she went into the house.

The visitor took no notice of this save that his face seemed to grow even darker. "My property!" he muttered again. "She must come. She is mine. I have paid for her."

As he spoke Gamira and Adri came in. They were both tired after a long morning's work in the fields. When Adri saw her husband she shrank back against the wall, staring at him with large unwelcoming eyes. Gamira sat down on the verandah, and undoing the bit of rag that was tied roughly round his head, produced some tobacco and passed it round. There was silence for a time. Then the stranger spoke, in a loud masterly way to cover his nervousness.

"Well, girl," he said. "We will go home to-day. Get your things ready."

Gamira looked up at that. He saw the small, squat figure, with the dirty clothes and all the tokens of poverty, and a little smile came on his face. Adri looked at him.

"I will not go," she said slowly, though her voice was faint.

Again the man lost his temper. "You care nothing for all I have done for you. Don't you remember how I loved you even when you were a child ; and when you were dying of hunger, I gave you the best rice, with curds, and chapatti fried in *ghee* ? And I have always given you the best clothes and better ornaments than any girl ever had in our village. That is why I am so poor now"—looking down at his clothes. "You know I had to raise a loan to get all the things you wanted, and now the merchant has taken nearly everything I have."

"I never wanted to marry an old man," she said sulkily.

At that answer he began to weep. They all felt uneasy as they watched the short, bearded man, gasping and sobbing, tears rolling down his cheeks. Had the fellow no dignity, they asked themselves, no sense of what was fitting ? They were glad that no one else was there, just themselves, a little group of Pardhans. They would hush it up. Julan resolved not even to tell Tigli about it. At last the man got up and fell at Adri's feet. "Oh, I love you so," he cried. "I love you. Your face plays before my eyes night and day. I am mad for you, I die for you. I am the slave of your feet. Do, do come back with me. I cannot live without you."

Again Gamira looked anxious. After all, Adri had lived with this man for many years. It was impossible to tell from her face what she was thinking. She said : "Come into the house, and let us talk by ourselves."

Gamira jumped up, really startled. "No," he said. "What is the need of that ? The girl now belongs to me."

Instantly Adri turned upon him. "And why shouldn't I talk to my husband if I want to?" she cried. Satula's heart gave a leap of exultation; the charm was working. Adri's words had been sharp as nails, and she strutted like an irritated crow into the house.

Nor was Gamira less affected. To Satula, watching him, he seemed to bristle all over like a porcupine. He sat there, a bundle of angry quills, listening to the low murmur of voices inside the house. Satula laughed out loud for sheer pleasure. At last the man came out, and without saying a word to anyone or even bidding farewell, went into the street. Satula ran to the door. "He has gone," she said, with real regret. "He has gone over the top of the hill. Perhaps he will sleep to-night at Chakmaktola."

"Who knows?" said Gamira indifferently.

But the next morning Adri had disappeared. There had been a tremendous quarrel during the night, and Satula and Gamira had come to blows. Adri had slept alone, refusing even to speak to Gamira. She must have slipped out of the house long before dawn. Gamira rushed up and down the village street, calling at every house. Satula thought he had never looked so handsome as now, his fine body alive with energy, his face alight with strong excitement, anxiety in his eyes. At last Sitaram the Ahir said that in the very early morning he had seen the girl going over the top of the hill. "No doubt the man was hiding up there all night. Who knows where they are now?"

"They must have gone to Dundisarai," said Julan in

his deep voice, " and then on to Pakhripani, and then to Tikaria where he lives. You must follow, Gamira."

But Gamira was already calling Tiblu, and presently the two were joined by Tok Singh, who allowed himself to be gloomily excited. Just before they left Gamira went to his house, and pulled out from the roof a long spear that he had hidden there some months before. As he did so he dislodged a small bundle which fell lightly to the ground.

" What is that ? " said Tiblu idly, and picked it up. But then his excited cry brought the others round him. " Look," he shouted. " It is a quarrel charm, like the one Tiharu made when she wanted to bring trouble to my father's house." He shook the feathers and the quills on to the ground.

" It must have been Bhuta," cried Satula from her doorway. She was a little frightened, but far more anxious because the charm would now lose its power.

" Never mind who it was," said Gamira. " Probably it was Bhuta, but it doesn't matter. We have broken it. Now we must go as quickly as we can."

Grasping their sticks the two others followed him at a steady run towards Dundisarai.

But they had to go ten miles before they found the fugitives. At Pakhripani, Tok Singh had a *jawara* (friend) who had recognized Adri and had discussed her flight with half the village. Two miles beyond they found them resting by a little stream. Tiblu caught hold of the man, and the others began to beat him. Adri stood silent,

aloof, neutral. The charm was still on her, though it was passing. She felt very tired, and very puzzled. Why had she come with this old goat, and left her Gamira who looked magnificent as he flourished his long spear in the air? And her husband, this poor *kukra-raja*, was on his knees again.

"Don't beat me," he cried. "I will let her go with you. But I must have a hundred rupees. The marriage is registered. I will go to the court."

"Are you mad?" shouted Gamira, waving his spear wildly. "How can I give you a hundred? How can I give you ten? I am a poor man. The most I can give you is a bullock."

"Didn't you have a good crop this year?" retorted the other.

"It was nothing. Come, I will give you thirty. But you must never come here again."

"It is monstrous to use the words. Thirty rupees is an insult. I must have eighty at least."

"No, I can only give you half that."

"Fool," said Adri, suddenly coming to life. She seemed now really like a queen, so great was her scorn for these men who bargained for her as if she were some cattle. "What do any of them care for me?" she thought. "It is their own bodies they love." "Fool," she said again. "Am I worth no more than forty? Give him fifty rupees and let him go. And you"—she turned to her husband. "You will take fifty. That is all your father got when your mother ran away with the Christian cook."

"Very well," he said hastily. He did not want to hear any more about the Christian cook, and he had never expected to get more than fifty. And with fifty rupees he could buy a new wife, young and small, perhaps one who was quite new to men. He kindled at the thought.

"Come," he said. "And quickly. Am I to wait all day?"

They were almost silent as they made the ten long miles back to the house. It was dark when they arrived, but by the light of the fire Gamira counted out the money, five little piles of ten. Adri's husband tested every coin. Adri stood against the wall, expressionless. A few neighbours, Tok Singh among them, came in to watch.

Julan was in high feather. "This is a great day," he roared. "I sent Tutta out for some wine this morning. We will make friends and enjoy ourselves." He shouted to Satula to bring the food, and once he had got the money, Adri's husband blossomed out into an unexpected geniality. And now, to complete Julan's felicity, Nanas came in with two young maina birds which he had caught up on the hill. They seemed to take an immediate liking to the old leper, hopped on to his knee and began chattering away to his great delight. "Birds always know their master," he chuckled. "Where is that wine, bring me some at once." When he got it he tried to make the birds drink, but they fluttered up on to his shoulder out of the way. So he had to drink a double quantity, both for himself and for

them ; before long his laughter could be heard all down the street. Tiblu came in with Singaru, laughing and chatting in a way that brought a scowl to Tok Singh's already gloomy face. He got up and went over to the kitchen, where Satula was sitting rather miserably on the threshold, brooding over the failure of her charm.

Phulmat's departure had been a great blow to Tok Singh ; she had been his one helper—all the others were supporting Tiblu. How maddening it was ! To be all worked up to it—and then at the last moment the little fool gets frightened and says she's never been with a man. That at least he didn't believe. It was unheard of for a Gond girl to be frightened. Look at her now with Tiblu. Very well, he would try what a little threatening would do. He turned to Satula, knowing that every word he said would at once be repeated to Tigli and Singaru.

" Do you know what happened to Raju ? " he asked abruptly.

" What Raju ? "

" You know—Putchi's younger wife's sister."

" Of course I remember the little hussy well."

" Hussy is right ! " said Tok Singh with satisfaction. " Well, my cousin Jantri was once in love with her, mad for her, dying for her, her face danced in his eyes night and day, she was his queen. Such breasts ! So firm ! So round ! " He laughed bitterly. " She promises to go with him to the jungle, and when he goes to meet her she never comes, says she knocked her foot against a stone and it stopped her. Jantri is full of rage.

He waits outside her house, and when she throws away the leaves she ate her dinner off, he picks them up, and carries them off. Then he goes down to the river bank and there makes a little pit and buries the leaves in it. He offers them to Samduria Deo, and says a charm that will make Raju unclean for months and months, not just for a few days. And it happened! She couldn't cook, she couldn't go into the kitchen, she was nearly mad. And at last she had to go and fall at his feet and promise to do everything he wanted. Then he went to the river and dug up the leaves and burnt them. At once she was able to wash her clothes, and he had her. Do you understand?" He thrust his big face into Satula's. "Look at them clapper-clawing each other over there," he cried. "But remember this. My cousin Jantri taught me that charm, and I too can use it." He got up and stalked away.

Satula was very disturbed. Her faith in charms had waned a little since morning, but all the same she thought she had better warn Singaru at once. But Singaru was strange that night. There was an exultation about her, and all she would say was that she wasn't in the least frightened of Tok Singh. "Let the drunken clown do whatever he likes," she said.

So Satula went to Tigli, who took a much more serious view of the matter. Her coarse, affable, humorous face hardened at once. Tiharu was sitting by her, half drunk, crouching to the ground. "Burn everything, always," said the old witch. "Old leaves, hair, nail-parings, cast-off shoes—burn them, burn them."

She glared at Satula with gleaming eyes. Tigli got up at once, and waddled out of the house.

Meanwhile Julan and Adri's husband had both got thoroughly drunk, and were overflowing with love for the whole world.

"This is a good day for you and Tiblu to become *jawara*," Julan shouted to Gamira. "What do you say, Panda?"

"Certainly a very good day," approved the old man. "It is a Monday, and to-day everyone is happy."

"Then let us begin. Satula, make the court ready."

The *jawara* is one of the grades of Gond friendship, not so unique as the *mahaprasad* which is made only between the greatest friends, not so sacred as the *sakhi* which is a divine bond coming down from the sky, but yet a most intimate, lifelong association. Gond life is enriched by these and many other such intimacies, solemnly entered upon, unbreakable, more lasting than the marriage tie, which traverse even the sternest tribal barriers. So that though Tiblu could not eat from Gamira's hands, he could be his *jawara*, and share almost everything in his life, except his food, his water and his pipe.

Satula came out with her hands full of cow-dung, and prepared a little square patch in the middle of the court. Adri brought some flour, and kneeling down, traced fantastic patterns on the square. Then they brought cow-dung with fire in it, a little pot of milk, and some *ghee*. Tiblu hurried home, and returned with a brass dish, on which they put a coconut, some rice, salt, and a

packet of *bidi*[1] and a box of matches. His father followed, carrying a bunch of fresh young shoots of wheat. Inside the house, Gamira was preparing his dish of presents. He could not resist the chance of showing off, and he added to the customary gifts a rupee and a small dhoti.

Then the two friends sat down, one on either side of the square. Putchi was on the third side, Panda Baba on the fourth. The others sat round watching.

Panda Baba began the ceremony by pouring a little *ghee* on the burning cow-dung, and a thin trail of smoke went upward. Then he dabbled his fingers in the bowl of milk, and lightly touched the foreheads of the two friends. They rose to their feet, and picking up their gifts, exchanged them three times, so that in the end Gamira had Tiblu's dish and Tiblu had Gamira's. As they did so they both said "*Johar, jawara.*" Putchi handed them some of the shoots of wheat : they placed these over each other's ears and embraced. Putchi took the coconuts and smashed them on a stone. One of the nuts was rotten, but they divided up the other. Gamira placed a small bit of the coconut in Tiblu's mouth and Tiblu did the same in return, and after that they distributed it to the whole company. Everybody was pleased. In a world of quarrels and disunion a new bond had been made. There was a treaty of friendship that could never be broken. Gamira and Tiblu would stand by one another all their lives ; they would help each other in every enterprise ; they were so closely

[1] Cheap bazaar cigarettes.

united that henceforth they must not even use each other's names, just as if they were husband and wife.

Julan was very drunk in his corner, but he could still exert himself to play the host. "Now we must dance," he shouted. They hastily got ready, and in a few minutes the roar of the drums and a burst of song disturbed the night. Gamira did not dance. He sat by the fire and watched. Tok Singh did not dance either. He sat as near as he could to Julan who had control of the supply of wine, and drank as much as he could.

But Tiblu had a drum, and Singaru was dancing, hand in hand with Satula, in the middle of the line of women. To and fro they swung, their feet pounding the ground, yielding themselves to the ecstasy of rhythmic movement. Tiblu danced and drummed like a man possessed; he leapt into the air, crouched down before the line of women, jumped erect, spun round, and away he went all by himself into a corner. Then back again—every movement brought him a little nearer to Singaru. At last he was immediately in front of her. He rushed up to the line of women, then just when a collision seemed inevitable, leapt away. And always a little nearer. At last they were almost touching as the line swung to and fro. She was bending forward in the movement of the dance, her sari had fallen a little, her hair brushed his arm. He saw his chance, his hand shot out, swift as the wind, and touched her breast. It was the sign. How would she respond? He spun round and round, went away into his corner, danced back again before daring to look at her. Now she was

standing erect, and in her eyes was a look he could not understand. But it was a look that gave him hope.

Gamira sat deep in thought. They had begun to sing one of Phulmat's favourite songs. The last time they had danced together she had sung it, he beating the drum before her.

O green Diwali ! O green Diwali ! We shall meet, we shall meet at Diwali.
Wherever we be, our spirits will meet.
The swan will not remain, though you tempt him with costly pearls.
He longs for his own country.
O Diwali ! O green Diwali !

As he listened, Gamira's thoughts sped away to Phulmat. He looked across at Adri, flirting with Sitaram the Ahir. Had he been wise, he wondered, to drive all that faithfulness and delight from his house ? Would they ever meet again ? Should he even now bring her back again ? But she was a leper, she was tainted, she was a menace to his strong and shapely body—he heartened himself as well as he could.

Tigli had come back : she had made a grand bonfire of everything that might be used against her by Tok Singh. Now she and Tiharu were sitting near him, absorbed in the latest news. "And then the poor child," the witch was saying with relish, "goes out to make water, and something like a black dog springs on him out of the night. The next morning, when the

parents get up, there is no child. They search and search and search, and they call the *gunia*, and at last he says the child was taken by a *raksha*, that poor unmarried ghost that lives in a semur tree. So then they go to all the semur trees, and at last, in the hollow trunk of one of them, they find the boy. He is crying and crying, and hasn't eaten for days, and he doesn't know where he is or what he's doing. So they take him home, and that night the black dog comes again, and this time it puts him in the big empty rice-bin inside the house. And there the poor boy stays for days, all alone in the dark. They put a blazing log of wood inside to look at him, but he catches hold of the fire and pulls it away from them."

"But he got all right in the end?" gasped Tigli, absorbed.

"Oh, yes, they sent for . . ."

Gamira could stand no more of it. "Oh, stop that nonsense," he cried irritably. They looked at him, astonished.

CHAPTER XII

WORLDLY HOPE

I

THE months went by. There was no news of Phulmat, yet she was not forgotten in Mulmula. As the anniversary of her flight drew near there was a strange outbreak of dreaming in the village. Tutta dreamt of her, so did Gamira, many times, so—unexpectedly—did Tiblu, to Singaru's annoyance. Naturally enough the rumour went round that Phulmat was dead, dead of sorrow and disease; Tiharu quickly added that she was not only dead, but that having died of sorrow she was turning into a spirit which would cause infinite trouble to the village if it was not appeased. She herself took the precaution of offering a small speckled hen, a very small one, to Phulmatdevi, as she now called her, so as to be on the safe side; but Panda Baba refused to go beyond a coconut.

"I want proof," he used to say. "Give me proof that she's dead, and I'll do anything you want. Or let her give someone leprosy, and we'll have a goat at least. But not till we know."

And as no one developed leprosy, and after a time

even the dreams ceased, the old man felt that his economy was fully justified.

Tiblu had made very little progress, for to every hint Singaru made the same reply, that she was not yet ready for a man. But at least he had the satisfaction of seeing Tok Singh drop right out of the running. Singaru would not look at him ; his clothes were dirty and untidy and he was drinking heavily. However, the defeat of a rival was not in itself sufficient to win a bride, and Tiblu grew more and more depressed. So when Gamira asked him to go with him down to the big bazaar at Duldul, he accepted with alacrity. Perhaps he could buy something there that would definitely touch Singaru's heart.

Gamira was growing rich. Everything had gone well with him since Adri came. The past year had been beyond all comparison the most prosperous and the happiest of his life. All the crops had been good. The *kodon* had been as successful as the special rice he had got from Government. Wheat had been magnificent. His bins were full of gram. The ramtilla had been a record. For everything he sold he got a good price, and as he saw himself prosper he became more assured in manner. He no longer trembled at the sight of a forest-guard, and when Dariya came to demand forced labour from the villagers, he sat in his house and refused to go. And when the others saw that nothing happened to him, they also refused, and after a time the police gave up sending to Mulmula.

Gamira also learnt a little arithmetic from Putchi,

enough to do his accounts, and the merchants were not able to cheat him any longer. His cattle were also doing well ; both the new cows had calved, none of the bullocks had died, and the hens that ran about the court had started to lay with great regularity. Twice a week Adri carried the eggs to the forest office to sell them, and now she insisted on being paid properly. The ranger, who had an eye for a pretty girl, sometimes even gave a little more than she asked.

So there was plenty of money for the Duldul bazaar. Indeed, it took two bullock carts to bring home all the new things that they bought there. With a prodigious creaking and rattling they drew up outside the house. Gamira climbed down from one, Tiblu from the other.

Nanas and Jiggeri ran out with screams of excitement, and all the Baiga children came tumbling up the street to see what was going on. Singaru ran across to help, and soon all the children in the village and several old women were standing round. Gamira climbed up into the first cart, and began handing down bundles of stuff to Satula and Adri. There were lamps, and tins of oil. There were some very exciting-looking bundles of cloth, and some blankets, and a thick stuffed cotton quilt, very gorgeous. Then with much heaving two great sacks of the finest lentil, a fat squat bag of *gur*, a sack of sweet potatoes, a sack of onions, a small light bag of spices, were carried into the house. Then everyone must go in to undo the parcel of clothes. Nanas was fitted out with a smart little waistcoat and a round cap, half red, half blue, with a silver band. Jiggeri had a real English

frock, pink, with blue flowers on it. There was a rose-coloured blouse for Satula and a pretty sari to match it. Tiblu, rather shyly, picked up another sari and put it under his arm. It was his wages for the work he had done on the carts, and was, of course, his gift to Singaru. But the bulk of the presents were for Adri. As they were being undone Panda Baba came in, beaming, chuckling with pleasure, and took as much interest in the proceedings as any of the women. He and Tigli fairly pounced on the saris, held them up to the light, felt the texture, pronounced them very good. There were three of them, better than anything that had ever before been seen in that village. And then, with an air of triumph, Gamira brought out a little packet of jewellery. Panda Baba took it, and put the pieces on Adri himself. There was a beautiful *bindia*, which he tied carefully round her head, and even Satula had to admit that it made her look adorable. Then round her neck went a *hamel*, with eighteen rupee pieces, and at its climax a large betel-leaf of silver. And lastly there were two thick heavy silver *bohta* for her arms. At last Adri stood there, a queen, and they fell back and looked at her ; she was too lovely for envy ; they all admired her.

" He must be mad for her," whispered Singaru. " He is dying for love of her."

" My poor Phulmat," answered Satula. She ought to have had all those things. But she would have given them away ; this bitch would keep them all for herself.

All of a sudden there was a loud grunt from Julan.

From the first, the old lion had had his eye on that quilt. It was just exactly what was needed to make life easier for his old and twisted limbs. But now Gamira had presented him, in a rather off-hand and patronizing manner, with a cheap cotton blanket, and had handed the quilt to Adri to spread on their own bed.

Julan grunted—that was all for the moment. But he did not forget. One morning, when Gamira was strutting about in a pink silk turban—everyone had begun to be a little tired of Adri and Gamira by then—Julan looked up at him from red and swollen eyes, and said : " I suppose you know that you also are going to get this disease ? "

Gamira stood still. " Don't talk nonsense," he exclaimed. " How can I get it ? I have sent her away."

" That's nothing. In the hospital I learnt many things. If a man sleeps only once with a woman who has this illness, he may catch it. If he sleeps in the bed, he will."

" But it is a year now since I slept with her. Where are the signs of the disease ? "

" That means nothing. Listen. There was a girl. My mind faints at the memory of her, she was so beautiful. Long ago, when I was strong and young as you are to-day, I went with her to the forest. Afterwards I found that she was a leper. I was not afraid, but after four years I found those same marks on my body, and slowly, slowly I grew rotten. And you are condemned in the same way." He glared ferociously at him. " When a murderer is condemned to death,

he is not hanged on that same day, but certainly he is hanged when the time comes."

At last there was fear in Gamira's eyes. "It was four years afterwards," he gasped. "I never knew that." And then a rage took him. "You are an old fool and a liar," he shouted. "You want to frighten me and get my girl for yourself. I won't live here any longer." He flung himself out of the house, and went down the street shouting loud greetings to his friends on the way to keep his spirits up.

But from now onward fear began to shadow him. He grew a hatred for his own flesh. The least roughness of the skin, a little itch, the most trifling numbness, and he would sit sombre and apart for hours. Then like a madman he would rush to the river, and throw himself into the water, scrubbing himself with earth and stones.

And now Adri's fire began to cool, as it had always cooled. No longer could Gamira's breath kindle it to a white heat. Especially it had cooled since he seemed to be more anxious to save his own body than to kindle hers. She did not shrink from him, did not repulse him, only she never gave herself to him. Something was always kept back. And this, in the intervals when he did forget himself and seek her, maddened him, and drove him still more in upon himself. Then he began to suspect that she too had leprosy. Before he went to her he would search that golden body for the least trace of discoloration or unevenness. Once she had a ringworm on her breast, and for a month he left her

alone. She never forgave him for those cold and lonely nights.

Yet there was between them a bond unbreakable. For all her coldness to him she could not forget him. He was a wonderful lover. For he was a Pardhan, and in the Gond country it is said that only Pardhans and Mussalmans have the art of love. For the Gonds it is an encounter between tigers ; for the Baigas it is the congress of rabbits ; the Pankas, born of water, mate like fish ; but Pardhans and Mussalmans embrace as kings. How could she resist Gamira who, when the mood was on him, was like a prince, with his long slender arms, legs almost hairless but very strong, his thighs smooth and silken to the touch, the dark breasts with little wisps of hair, his glorious bronze-dark throat with its rosary of red and black beads ? He seemed very young ; in him was the beauty of a boy and a man's strength.

So Adri still loved Gamira, though not entirely. She was, however, fascinated by old Julan. For hours she would sit by him, listening to his tales of high adventure, those compromising tales of the Sonthagas, while Gamira watched jealously. Her body was safe enough from the old man, but her mind was not. Julan was a man of brains, which Gamira—for all his shrewdness in business —was not, and he caught Adri's mind, the very thing that Gamira had been hunting all that year and had never found.

II

Galgal was dancing in the crowd at the Chakmaktola bazaar. He was an old man of an unfathomably low caste, very big, with a huge, ugly, rather pathetic face. He seemed a giant among the little Gonds. He wore a sort of skull-cap on his head, his feet were tied up in thick bundles of dirty rags, his legs were wrapped in puttees. A tattered old Harrovian blazer and a rather smart pair of khaki breeches completed him. "*Hey dada, paisa, paisa,*" he screamed in a high thin voice to the passers-by, as he stirred his elephantine body to ever wilder antics.

"Don't give him anything," said an old woman. "They say he has a hundred and twenty-five rupees sown into that belt of his."

"That I wont," answered her gossip. "Do you know that he has to go to three different families every day in order to get enough food to fill his great paunch. They say he comes of a good family. . . ."

"That may be, but years of clearing away the sub-inspector's dung has made him what he is, poor old fellow. You heard what he did last week in our village?"

"Not a word."

"But everyone is talking of it. Well, what happened was that last bazaar day, Tikeratola bazaar day, that old Pankin, Bulbuli's mother, went down to the river

behind the village, all alone. This ancient iniquity saw her and followed. Years ago, it seems, she stole a few annas from him, and he swore vengeance on her. So that day down he goes—there was no one about—and does it—and when his business is over, he runs back to the bazaar, and does a big dance, singing all the time of what he had done. And so when she comes back with her water-pot, everybody laughs fit to kill themselves, and she is put out of the tribe at once."

There was a loud guffaw from behind them. They turned round annoyed. There was Bhuta, his great staring eyes for once filled with amusement and pleasure.

" So Bulbuli's mother is out of the tribe," he chortled. " Ho, ho, well done, old man ! "

The two women looked him up and down with hostility, but they were careful to say nothing. For Bhuta was dangerous, as all the district knew. They moved away, and Bhuta walked on through the village. He had money to spend and he was going to spend it on an object near his heart. He never forgot that he had an enemy. He had failed to strike at Gamira through Phulmat, but there was that other girl. She would be easier. He knew her type. You could seduce her with an orange. But he would leave nothing to chance. He wanted some good distinctive jewellery that a girl would take a risk to get. He had heard that the jeweller here had just the sort of thing he wanted.

At last, not in the bazaar but in a little house somewhat away from the village, he found his man, a tiny dried-up merchant, with the sharp face of a rat and restless

eyes. Bhuta squatted down in front of him, and there was a pause.

"I want some cheap ornaments," he said at last. "But not the stuff they sell in the bazaar."

"How much have you to spend?"

"I am a poor man; I have only five."

"If you want glass bangles for your bastards, who no doubt are many, you had better go to the bazaar."

Bhuta glared at him and the merchant shivered a little. The creature might be a snake, he thought.

"But if you are a man, and desire to do man's work," he went on hastily, "then I have some fine *dhar*, heavy and of the best silver. See," he added, holding them up so that the chains that hung from the silver shield swung to and fro, "how they will gently kiss the cheeks of the queen who wears them."

Bhuta looked at them eagerly. They were exactly what he wanted. They were, in fact, though he did not know it, the very pair that Phulmat had given Tutta over a year ago.

"What is their price?" he asked, throwing as much indifference as he could into the question. He half closed his eyes and swayed to and fro a little. *Ram Ram Ram*, thought the merchant, he will strike in a moment like a cobra. Let us cut the bargaining. He named his lowest price.

"Twelve-eight," he said shortly.

Without a word, Bhuta removed the money from his girdle. The merchant counted it, and his fingers itched to test each rupee in the usual way, but with those cold

eyes upon him he dared not do it. As he picked up the last of the coins, Bhuta's hand shot out like a flash and grasped the ornaments. And then in a moment he was up and out of the house, along the road, and back in the bazaar.

There was a great to-do in one of the houses there. "What's going on?" he asked suspiciously of Dariya the Panka who was passing.

The man laughed. "It's a wedding, of course. Have you forgotten, old man, or has the love of Gamira's girl made you crazy?" Bhuta started; did everybody know his secret? "Putchi's niece is being married to a man from Benipat, a man of the tiger clan. Go in and look; your old friend Tutta is there, he belongs to the same clan."

Of course it was a wedding. There was the queer little cake full of hairs outside the door, put there for the mischievous sprite Matia. Bhuta half closed his eyes and almost thought he could see the demon, impatiently pulling out the hairs one by one before he could enjoy the cake. But it was a good thing; it kept Matia so busy that he couldn't go in and annoy the merry-makers, as he had always done before they thought of this method of getting rid of him.

But they couldn't get rid of Bhuta, more dangerous than any ghost. He pushed his way through the crowd at the door and went into the central court of the house. He found a scene of wild excitement. In one corner sat the musicians, making, on enormous drums, a deafening music. An old woman, utterly drunk, her

hair in wild disorder about her shoulders, was wandering about the court, tripping over the spectators. A one-eyed man, with long hair down his back, was screaming instructions. The bride and bridegroom, covered with a yellow mess of *haldi*, were sitting in the centre, and one by one their friends were going forward and touching forehead, hands and feet, first with some milk, and then with the yellow paste. There was apparently a little friction between the friends of the bride and the friends of the bridegroom, for they had begun to sing songs against one another. Some very flushed young men from Benipat were gathered on one side, and their voices could be heard even above the roar of the drums.

Cook the lentil, cook the rice.
Prepare a dish of channa.
O what a pretty bride I've got!
Her nose is flat as any chapatti.
Alas! alas! All night and every night,
I'll have to sleep with her!

Putchi, over on the other side, listened to this with ever-growing wrath, and then jumped up, and, standing in front of his family, started a whole succession of songs that reflected on the virtue and potency of the bridegroom. "*A-re-re, le-le, bo-bo!*" they shouted, imitating the noise of a goat in its heat. "*Bo-bo, bo-bo, bo-bo, bo-bo.*" Bhuta began to enjoy himself. He chuckled softly, and then his eyes fell on Tiharu who was sitting opposite and glaring at him with cold

ferocity. A quiver of fear passed through him ; he had better get out of here. But he was wedged in, he could hardly move ; besides, his going would rouse comment. "*Bo-bo, bo-bo,*" shouted the singers.

Eat your supper quickly and put out the light.
Le-le, bo-bo, bo-bo.
I am like a fish in a dried-up stream.
I can't stay still for a moment.
Make the bed at once, my girl.
Le-le, bo-bo, bo-bo.
Do hurry up and get that bed ready.
Then take me in your arms, my girl.
Le-le, bo-bo, bo-bo.

There was a shout of laughter and then a sudden silence. One of the Benipat men had leapt to his feet, and was advancing in a slow and menacing fashion towards the centre of the court. He was growling and snarling, his eyes were half closed, he hardly seemed to know where he was. The spirit of the tiger had come. Then another man fell on all fours and ambled forward to join him, and they both began to roar more loudly. The people scattered, some running out into the street, some taking refuge inside the house. Panda Baba came out of an inner room, where he had been busily engaged in settling the details of the ceremony, and watched with a little smile of approval. Suddenly Tutta also became possessed, and uttering low ferocious growls, joined the others. Then for a time they all three stood in the middle of the

court, on all fours, their eyes half shut, swaying their bodies a little, roaring defiance.

From behind the house came the plaintive bleat of a goat, tethered there for sacrifice at a later stage of the marriage. Instantly the men leapt up, and in a flash were round the corner of the house. Tutta was the first to reach the goat. With a convulsive jerk he threw himself upon it, and it reared so violently that it knocked him to the ground. Then the two other men caught the terrified animal and dragged it into the main court, where they threw it on to its back, gripping its wildly plunging legs. Tutta, his arms hanging awkwardly, pathetically, by his side, scrambled up and, bending over the goat, plunged his teeth into its white throat. Several other men ran forward to hold the struggling animal, while the two others who were possessed by the tiger spirit began to drink the flowing blood in great thirsty gulps, only pausing from time to time to roar terrifyingly. Bhuta sat watching, a slight sneer on his face ; he was easier now, for Tiharu had run away with the other women when the spirit first came on the men.

Now the goat was still and the three tiger-men, their eyes wild and bloodshot, their mouths dripping with blood, a vile smell tainting them, danced round and round the court, shouting incoherently. One of them snatched up an axe and began to belabour himself with it. But Panda Baba hastily ran to him, and took it gently out of his hands.

But now the ecstasy was passing. They went slower and slower, until at last they fell in a heap, one on top of

another. Tutta struggled to his feet, went out into the road, and was violently sick. The glory and grandeur of the jungle had gone from him, and he was only a poor thirsty villager calling for wine. Bhuta suddenly felt sorry for him, brought a bottle of the fiery liquid, poured it down his throat. Tutta swallowed half of it and sat up with a broad grin. He was a man again.

The women were dancing in front of the house, and old Galgal was prancing round and round them in huge excitement.

The tiny chicks are scattered here and there about the road.
The wild cat catches them and eats them every one.
O mother, who art taking me round and round the pole,
Tell me who it is that will enjoy the first-fruits of my youth.

Tutta sat watching the dance with great enjoyment; the bawdy songs were excellent; nearly everyone was blissfully drunk; the hard realities of life were for the time forgotten. Bhuta was going from woman to woman in the line of dancers: he had a bottle of wine in one hand, with the other he caught their faces, tipped them up, then poured the liquid down their throats. Bhuta was certainly popular to-day. "A great fat elephant is sleeping with your mother O!" roared the singers.

Tiblu was trying in tipsy fashion to press another gift

on Singaru. The sari had been so well received that he thought he might venture on a ring. But the girl had one of her moods, and turned away from him without a smile.

A group of travellers came along the road and sat down by Tutta's side to rest for a moment and watch the dancing. After the usual greetings they told him that they came from Baihakapa, four days' journey away.

"What village did you say?" asked Bhuta, staggering up behind them, a fresh bottle in his hand. "Baihakapa? That's the village of madmen, isn't it?"

They laughed, but a little nervously. "That is a story of long ago. Now we aren't any more mad than the rest of the world. But it's true that it used to be said that no one could live in our village without going out of his wits. Who knows if it is true? And where do you come from?" they asked Tutta when Bhuta had gone on.

"Mulmula," he said. "Away up there on the hillside."

"Mulmula?" they all said. "Why, there is a girl living in our village from Mulmula."

Tutta started. "Is she a Pardhan?" he asked a little breathlessly.

"Certainly. Her name is Phulmat. She came a year ago. A very good girl. Dances well."

So she was not dead after all. How wise their Panda was!

"Is she married?" he asked again.

"No, there is some trouble about her. Who knows

what it is. So she lives by herself in a little house, and has a small shop, just a few rupees' worth of tobacco, but it keeps her. Well, brother, we must be going on. . . ."

"Wait one minute," said Tutta urgently, struggling to his feet. An idea had struck him. He pushed his way through the crowd and found Tiblu sitting on the ground with his back against a fence, drinking moodily out of a large black bottle.

"Give me that ring," said Tutta hastily.

Tiblu was too drunk to care. Tears filled his eyes. Without a word, he handed it to him. Tutta made the best of his way back to the travellers who were now on their feet, impatient to be gone.

Grinning with embarrassment, Tutta produced the ring. "That girl," he said. "I used to know her. She is my *nan dai*, my little mother. This ring belongs to her. Give it to her, will you?"

They looked at him, astonished.

"Tell her I'll be coming to see her soon," he went on.

"All right." One of them took the ring, and carefully tied it in a corner of his turban. "Well, brother, we must be getting on. Farewell."

The dancers, with a roar of drums, began a new song.

When you are young the world is yours.
In age no one desires you.
Why have you left your mother's house?
Why are you going to your father-in-law?
O I am going to meet my king,
While I am young, while I am young,

For in age no one desires you.
How did you leave your mother's house ?
How did you come to your father-in-law ?
With tears I left my mother.
With a smile I came to the house of my king.

The next morning Tiblu, in company with most of the younger generation of Mulmula, felt excessively unwell. By evening he had decided that he must do something definite about Singaru. It was no good offering her rings, and talking to her about the beauty of the lonely forest : he must do something drastic : he got up and went straight down the village street to see Tiharu. Satula's love-charm had been useless, but then Satula was just an ordinary pretty girl. He wanted something more definite, more potent, more sinister. So he went to Tiharu.

He had never been into the house before, and he felt —as everybody felt when they entered it for the first time—a pang of pity and desire for Tiharu's daughter, the girl who lay crippled and lonely in the dark. But Tiharu took him into the kitchen and shut the door. He had never been with her alone before, and he was very nervous. She was astonishingly ugly, with her hair-lip and little beard. Was it his imagination, or were her eyes really shining red in the dark ? Perhaps it was just the flickering light of the fire over which she sat. Her first remark was not encouraging.

She extended a grimy palm and said : " Two rupees."

This was a blow, for he had only half that sum.

When he told her she swore a little, but at last accepted it, and then staggered him by saying : " Of course, you want some magic to make that little drab Singaru love you."

She clawed at him with her hand. " Come near me, near me," she whispered.

When she could put her mouth to his ear, she spoke. She told him how he was to find a crane, living or dead —it didn't matter, what was needed was the bones. " If you can't get a crane, get a black grasshopper. Burn it, and mix it with some cow's butter. Then rub your own chest till you've got a little of the dirt off it. Put it in a leaf, and then go and find where your girl has left her footprints. Take some of the earth from the right one, —the right one, mind—and mix that dust with your own dirt—but don't look at her when you do it—and then mix the whole lot together. Then you'd better persuade someone—Satula or Adri would do—to go with Singaru to the river. When she stoops down to get the water, let your friend rub the charm on her back and shoulders and hair. The more she can rub it on the better it will be."

" But will it really work ? " asked Tiblu.

" She will dream of you at night. All day she will remember you. She will be restless as parched rice in the pan. She will do anything to get you. But remember, don't look at her as you are picking up her dust. If you do, all will be spoilt. And then . . ."

She looked round fearfully, came still closer to him, and whispered again in his ear.

It was dark when Tiblu came out of the house. He went straight to Panda Baba who had invited him to a special dinner of fish. "It's very good for the eyes," he had said, but Tiblu knew also its value for his manhood. Bhuta was there, and Tok Singh. Gamira and Adri had also been invited but had to eat separately. Tutta sat by the door. They fed well. The gohoria had a thought too many bones, but the long bami like an eel, and the kotri were delicious.

The talk soon turned to Phulmat. Bhuta declared that she was a witch and had been sending the dreams herself. Tok Singh and Tiblu took the view that she was dead, and reproached Panda Baba for not taking the matter up more seriously. Gamira said nothing at all. It was left to Tutta to reveal the truth.

"She is in Baihakapa," he said, and told them of his encounter at the Chakmaktola bazaar the previous day.

They were all interested, even excited. Gamira and Adri, embarrassed, got up and went away, saying that old Julan wanted them to sing to him. When they were gone everybody felt freer. "We must call her back," said Tok Singh. If he couldn't get Singaru he might try for Phulmat: they had always been great friends.

"Yes, but who can go? There is far too much work in the fields for anyone to be spared, and then the rains will come."

"I'll go," said Tutta suddenly. "There's still a month or two before the rains."

They were all pleased. "Nothing could be better,"

said Panda Baba. "I will give you money for the journey."

"And I'll give you a blanket," said Bhuta unexpectedly. He too wanted to see Phulmat again.

"I can't give you anything," confessed Tiblu. "We are so much in debt to the Panjabi, and who knows what the harvest will be like this year."

"It will be good, it will be good, without a doubt of it," exclaimed Panda Baba.

"I remember a Panjabi," said Bhuta suddenly. They had never known him so expansive. "But no, it wasn't really a Panjabi who did it. It was a contractor sahib, and he had a Panjabi servant. There was a poor Baiga called Hatkadi who bought some land from him for a hundred rupees. He paid him forty one year and another forty the next year, that was what they had agreed, and then the third year the contractor demanded the whole hundred rupees, and said the forty rupees were only interest. Well, what could the poor Baiga do? He didn't know anything about the police or the courts, so he hid in the jungle whenever this whoreson contractor sent his servant, the Panjabi, to demand the money. At last the Panjabi came at night and slept all night outside the Baiga's door. When the poor man wakes up in the morning there this great bully is standing at the door, with a thick stick in his hand. 'My money,' he says. 'The money is with the headman,' says the Baiga, trembling all over. 'Let me put on my dhoti and I'll go with you to get it.' Back he goes into the house, puts on his dhoti, and takes some poison in

his hand. When they reach the headman's house the Baiga asks for some tobacco, and while he is pretending to fill his pipe, slips the poison into his mouth. Then he says: 'I can only give you twenty rupees.' The Panjabi gets angry and begins to beat him. Then the poison begins to work; the Baiga leaps into the air, and falls down. The Panjabi runs after him and goes on beating him. The Baiga jumps up again and again and again, three times he leaps in the air, and the fourth time he falls down dead."

Tutta nodded his head again and again. "You are absolutely right. I have said it a hundred times. If you would go through life safely, you must avoid witches and Panjabis."

CHAPTER XIII

USURIOUS HAND

I

TIBLU spent the next two days collecting the materials for his charm; he had to go to the upper reaches of the Narbada to get the bones of the crane, and that took all day. Then he had to spend the whole of the next morning dodging about after Singaru until she left her footprint in a place where he could remove the dust without making himself ridiculous. The dirt from his own chest was more readily acquired. But at last everything was in order, and he went to find Adri to persuade her to take the charm and put it on Singaru.

But Gamira and Adri were out in the fields. Another good harvest was almost ready, and they had made a little shed of leaves and branches, so low it was that they couldn't even sit up in it, but it was very cosy to sleep in during the night. In front they used to make a big fire. For bears, porcupine, wild pig were constant marauders. Gamira's fields were on the sunny, sheltered side of the hill, where the soil was deep, rich, fertile, of the kind they called *gobra*, a perfect soil for wheat. But even Rannu's crop which fought for life on the

most exposed and stony ground, in the poor red *barra* soil, was doing well. This year, the village had asked the Baiga to perform the ceremonies at the sowing of the seed—and he had indeed performed such a worship of Mother Earth as they had never seen before. And now everyone was saying what a difference it had made. Bhuta, particularly, made a point of saying so whenever Panda Baba was about, and the old man would have died of mortification, had not Gamira and his friends loudly proclaimed that the success of the harvest was due, not to the Baiga, but to the improved type of wheat that they had obtained from Government. But, of course, everyone really believed that it was the Baiga.

So Tiblu had to go out to the fields; he took two bottles of wine slung over his shoulder, and after they had all got a little drunk, it was an easy matter to persuade Adri to take the charm and promise that she would put it on Singaru the very next day.

The next morning they all came back to the village, and Adri—the love-charm carefully hidden in her sari —went at once to ask Singaru to go with her to the river. But Singaru and her mother had already gone to the fields, and there was no one at home save old Rannu. It was some time before she could find even him, for he was doing something inside the house, and seemed unwilling to come out. When he did come, he peered at her suspiciously and was so irritable that Adri left him at once, merely asking him to tell Singaru to come across to the Pardhan house as soon as she came home.

Tiblu was waiting outside for her. "Not now, not now, you young bull," she said, pushing him. "I'll go and fetch water with her this evening when she comes back from the fields. Don't worry: I will do it to-day without fail."

"All right," said Tiblu. He still had the two bottles, now pathetically empty, slung from his shoulder. "Come along, *jawara*," he shouted to Gamira. "I'll have to drink all day. I feel like a fish when you've thrown all the water out of the river. I can't live through to-day unless I'm drunk. I want to be like an onion."

"An onion," exclaimed Adri, surprised.

"Yes, drunk as an onion rolling about on the ground."

Over the way, in a dark corner of his hut, hidden out of sight, Rannu was very busy. He had no time for visitors to-day. It was a good thing the Pardhan girl had gone so quickly: sometimes these women stayed for hours. For his work was the most important in the world: he was counting his money. This month the landlord's agent would come; Putchi had already been bothering him for the twelve annas (an unlucky number that) for the *nishtar* which he had to pay for all their forest-produce, firewood, thorns to hedge the fields, the broad leaves from which they ate; and his two buffaloes were a terrible expense. All these things had to be paid in cash. There wasn't nearly enough. There was one rupee, all in worn copper pieces, sixty-four of them; and then another, and then fourteen annas. That was the total of his savings. And he had to pay four

rupees to the landlord, and this twelve annas for *nishtar*, and two rupees for the cattle-tax, and then above all there was the debt to the Panjabi. These other things came upon him only once a year, but to the Panjabi he had to give one rupee, nine annas every month. And then there was a present to the agent, say six annas, and the headman would expect two annas at least—but he could get out of that if only Singaru would go to live with Tiblu—and he would have to give four annas to the forest-guard. Well, he might just do it if this year's crop was good and he was able to sell the whole of it, keeping half the grain and the *kodon* for food. Gamira would probably buy from him, and give him a good price; that would be better than taking it to the market where the merchants would be sure to cheat him in the weighing.

A gust of wind blew a cloud of acrid smoke into his face. With tears streaming from his smarting eyes, he pushed the coins back into their hiding-place and went into the court. Everyone was out in the fields. Tigli and Singaru had gone very early in the morning, and had taken their food with them. He was alone. A mood of black depression fell upon him. He looked round at the tumbledown house, the mud plaster falling from the walls, the thatch broken in a dozen places. Five years ago he would have got up and mended it, but now he couldn't control his limbs or his shaking head. He thought of those first innocent and painless sores that had brought him to this. A few scraggy chickens ran across the court. There was a lone papaya

tree, now bare of fruit. The police had come into his house last week, and without even a greeting to him had removed the last of the fruit. And they now had only one large brass pot left; nearly all their pots and every one of Tigli's ornaments had been sold to pay the ever-pressing demands upon them.

It had all begun through his going to jail. Once, while still a boy, he had visited a distant village in search of a wife. That night he slept in a house where they were brewing liquor against the law, and very early in the morning an Excise Inspector and two assistants raided them. There was a pitched battle, for everyone was very drunk, and the Inspector was beaten. Then the police came, and arrested all of them, and young Rannu, though he had done nothing, got six months. That would have mattered little, but when he came out of jail, he found that no one would share his pipe or eat with him. He must have broken the tribal rules in jail, they said, and eaten with Christians and Chamars. So he had to give a dinner to the village. It would cost at least fifteen rupees, and he had no money. The headman also demanded a fine of four rupees. He tried to steal, was caught, and was imprisoned for a year. He was an "habitual" now. This time, in order to please the Superintendent, he consented to do sweeper's work, for according to the regulations Gonds may be so employed. But ever afterwards he was afraid that someone would discover what he had done. When he came out of jail this time, he was able to borrow enough to give a dinner and thus be admitted to his

tribal privileges. But he knew that if ever anyone discovered that he had done sweeper's work, he would be turned out again and never readmitted, no matter what he did. But that dinner was once more his undoing. In order to get the money for it, he had to sign a bond promising to work for the interest, the original sum to be repaid in cash. But, of course, as he had to work all day to pay the interest, he never had time to earn anything with which to repay the principal. At last, after a year of this slavery, the Deputy Commissioner, who was a Mussulman, heard of it, and he tore up the bond and had the money-lender paraded round the village, while a policeman read aloud from a paper a description, not flattering, of his business methods. Ever after that Rannu had loved and trusted all Mussulmans. " Gonds and Mussulmans were created brothers,' he would say. " For they both yoke the cow to their ploughs."

Then came the first great good fortune of his life. Rannu married Tigli, a perfect friend and wife. They could not afford a regular marriage, but he gave her bangles in the presence of the village and they drank a good deal of wine, and everyone felt that was sufficient. Tigli had some jewellery, and she brought a little money with her, so they were able to take some land and buy a pair of buffaloes. It was then that he came to Mulmula, when Singaru was born.

At first they were great friends with the Panjabi and when his younger brother was to be married, and the family worried him for the money, Rannu took a loan

of fifty rupees from him. But since then the loan had been a burden that was never lightened. As the Panjabi himself grew poorer, he became more and more exacting; lender and borrower sank down together to an ever more miserable poverty.

"In the old days, when the Gonds ruled the world," Rannu would say with a mournful shake of his head, "then showers of gold fell upon our fields. Then one worked and ten ate of his labours. Now ten work, but do not earn enough for one."

II

The very next afternoon, when Gamira was sitting in his house, resting after the midday meal, Tiblu came running from the fields. "A storm is coming," he shouted. "The wind is marching up the valley." Gamira felt cold all over, as though fever were about to attack him. Calling Adri and Satula he ran up the hill to a point where they could see right across the fields. There was Bhuta's wheat, four fields of it, and then Putchi's channa, and then one field of Rannu's channa, and then one field of Rannu's wheat—nearly all the village had its fields on that side of the hill. Only Gamira and the Panjabi had their crop on the other sheltered side, for Julan's father had long ago acquired as much of that land as possible, and the Panjabi had recently taken his fields from Putchi in payment of a debt.

Helpless, the villagers stood and watched the storm. Tall columns of dust were stalking with an appalling rapidity across the fields; the sky was black, streaked with vivid lightning; trees bent before the gale; clouds of leaves and flowers flew up into the air, whirling round and round before they were dashed to earth. Then with a resigned horror the little company watched the wind strike their splendid harvest, the broad fields just ready for reaping. On the heels of the wind came the rain, and a cold hail which drove the smitten crops into the ground.

When he saw the hail strike the field on which he had placed all his hopes, old Rannu sank to the ground, and buried his face between his hands. He did not move even when the white cloud of hail burst on the hill where they were watching, and Gamira and Tiblu had to pick him up and carry him back to his house.

Hour after hour the wind drove against the harvest. It was still cutting it, an insane and angry reaper, as darkness fell.

At dawn they went out to a scene of desolation. Only on the far side of the hill the fields were comparatively undamaged. But on the other side, it was ruin and devastation. The sun shone bright and glorious from a rain-washed sky, and all nature, clean and freshened, sang with delight. But the women wept, and old Tigli shook her fist at the bright sky, declaring roundly that "God was like a stupid tax-collector who snatched all he could from the poor, but bowed his head before the rich." Panda Baba went to and fro, offering

sympathy, but with a slightly pleased expression on his face. That Baiga hadn't been so effective, after all. Next year, they would know better than to entrust their fate to a dirty old man who cleaned himself with leaves. Panda Baba had another reason for self-congratulation : he had gone shares with Julan and Gamira in their fields, and so he also gained through the preservation of their crop.

All day the villagers worked, trying to save a few gleanings from the fields, desecrated by Nature herself. Gamira went to help his *jawara*, and returned late, but before going up to his own house, he looked in for a moment on Rannu with the hope of cheering him.

The house looked more tumbledown than ever. Yesterday's storm had battered the mud walls, and torn bundles of straw from the roof. The Panjabi was sitting on a low seat in the middle of the court, warming his hands at a struggling fire of twigs. Rannu sat dejectedly on the verandah, and the women peeped through the half-closed kitchen door.

" I must have the interest to-day," the Panjabi was saying in a very loud voice : he had heard that Rannu was going to sell his two buffaloes to make up for the loss he had sustained over the ruin of his crops, and had decided that he had better make sure of his money before that happened. " The money was due three days ago," he went on. " And if you don't give it, I will take your buffaloes."

" What's the matter ? " asked Gamira, coming in.

" He who has a money-lender for a friend," answered

Rannu wearily, "has no need of enemies. It is that old debt of ours. You know all about it. Five years ago we took fifty rupees from him for my younger brother's marriage. He has the bond. For five years and two months I've paid one rupee, nine annas every month. It has ruined us. I am an ignorant man. How do I know whether I have paid him back or not?"

Gamira was counting, very laboriously. He took a charred stick from the fire and made some calculations on the ground. At last he said: "You have paid nearly a hundred rupees in interest."

The Panjabi watched these proceedings with alarm. He had always avoided Gamira since the decasting of Phulmat. He shouted at Rannu: "What is all this to do with me? The original sum is still unpaid. And it is no business of yours," he went on, turning to Gamira. "If I don't get the money to-day, I will certainly take his buffaloes. It is written here in the paper."

Gamira stood up. He was trembling with rage. It had all come back to him, the disgrace that this fellow had brought upon his house. Revenge, revenge, was his one thought. He said nothing, however, but went straight out of the house. Singaru slipped out after him.

"I have a little money," she whispered. "Shall we give him that? But if we do, I can't..." She covered her face shyly with her sari.

"Can't do what?" asked Gamira, full of excitement. Adri had put the charm on her the evening before, but none of them had expected it to work so soon. He felt an increased respect for Tiharu.

"Can't go to live with him."

"Who? Tiblu?"

She nodded. "In the night, he came in a dream," she said, coming very close and lowering her voice to a whisper. "Now I know it is he who really loves me. And—and I am ready now."

Gamira smiled broadly: he was flattered at her confidence, delighted at their success. He was not usually generous, but now he had plenty of money, and in his present mood he was ready to help anyone, let alone his *jawara*.

"That is very good," he said. "But, of course, you mustn't give your money. I'll see to everything. Go home and keep that devil sitting there, and I'll come back at once."

She looked adorable. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. Under the circumstances, any other girl would have kissed him. But he knew she would refuse. It would be no good.

He went into his house and dug up the tin where he kept his money. If I give the Panjabi twenty-five, he thought, he will leave the old man alone. I might even get that paper from him. And they can repay me gradually. We have plenty of money now.

Adri came in. "What are you doing?" she asked curiously. He had arranged five little heaps of five rupees each on the floor.

"I am going to give this to the Panjabi for Rannu's debt. You know how yesterday his harvest was ruined, the unfortunate man that he is, and to-day this Panjabi

—may a tiger kill him—whose crops, like ours, were hardly damaged, has come threatening him if he doesn't pay. It's a cruel thing, so I shall give him the money."

"But why do you waste your money on them," protested Adri.

"If I don't help them, then Singaru and my *jawara*. . ."

Instantly Adri was in a temper. She had done quite enough for Rannu's household already, she felt, and it was ridiculous the fuss all these men were making about a little chit of a girl like Singaru.

"Oh, it's Singaru you're after, is it?" she cried. "Very good, very good indeed. Go and give her all our money and then I'm sure she'll sleep with you; it's plain you've grown tired of me. Look—I want some more ornaments, but you'll never give me anything I want. I can starve. . . ."

But Gamira had by now buried the rest of the money, and was going hurriedly out of the house. So Adri went to Julan instead, and sitting down beside him, began to pour into his willing ear the full tale of her grievances.

Gamira returned to Rannu, and in half an hour had settled everything; the paper even was in his hands. The Panjabi was very frightened of Gamira, afraid that Phulmat would be mentioned. Besides, he had never hoped to get as much as twenty-five, specially now that the crops had been ruined. The buffaloes were poor creatures in any case, and would probably have died

in a few months. So, pleased with his bargain, he got up and turned to go.

As he went Rannu cried out in a high thin voice: "You have troubled me all these months. Now I put this curse upon you. May you die, far from your home, in a stranger's house." And when the man had gone, Rannu took hold of his ears with both his trembling hands and cried: "I will rob a dead body of its clothes and put them on, sooner than ever again have dealings with a Panjabi."

But then their mood changed. The burden was lifted from them; they shouted with laughter as they thrust the bond into the fire and watched it burn to ashes.

"And now," said Gamira happily, "what revenge can we take on this fellow who rapes our girls and ruins our fortunes?"

They talked for an hour, without reaching a conclusion.

"Come, we must go and ask Julan," said Tigli at last. "He's the only one of you with any brains."

They all went across to the leper's house, sat before him and asked him what to do. Julan closed his eyes, and thought for a full five minutes. They waited breathless. At last he spoke.

"Go, Gamira, and call Panda. Then you two with your *jawara* go to this Panjabi, and tell him that he will become a leper. He slept with our girl, and he will surely catch the disease."

He opened his eyes, glared at Gamira with the utmost malignity, and uttered a sharp rasping laugh. "Go and

tell him that," he shouted. "Go on, Gamira, you'll both rot together, you'll both rot together." He laughed insanely.

They gazed at him terrified, then went softly away. Outside the night seemed blacker.

III

The next morning, Gamira and Tiblu went to see Panda Baba. They told him what Julan had suggested, though Gamira shivered with fear as he did so.

Panda Baba nodded his head wisely. "Yes," he said. "It is a house of ill omen. It faces south towards the City of the Dead."

"Yes," added Tiblu eagerly, anxious to show that he was a worthy disciple of the old man. "And the roof is lower at the back than in front. It is tiger-mouthed, not cow-mouthed. And that tiger's mouth swallowed up our Phulmat."

"Then he deserves the ruin that will certainly come to him," declared Panda Baba calmly. "Come, let us go and talk to him."

The three walked solemnly into the house. "We have come," said Gamira, "to talk about Phulmat."

The Panjabi was alarmed. This was just what he had feared when Gamira had interested himself in Rannu's affairs. Now he would probably demand the twenty-five back again.

"I have done nothing," he stammered. "But if you

want money I will give it. Oh, it was a very small matter. Ten rupees for some wine and tobacco, and we will all be friends ? "

Panda Baba was looking on the ground. Gamira paused for a few moments.

" We don't want your money," he said at last. " We have come to tell you a certain matter. That is all."

" Yes," added Tiblu. " We've come to tell you something."

" And that will be sufficient," concluded Panda Baba.

There was something terrifying about the stillness of the three men and the sense of triumph in them. The Panjabi began to tremble.

" What is it ? " he gasped.

Gamira leant forward. There was an expression of utter weariness on his face, as if he had not slept all night, which was indeed the fact.

" I will tell you," he said. " Do you know why I drove my lovely Phulmat out of the house ? "

" Because you wanted to keep another girl," answered Panjabi boldly.

" You lie, you spoiler of our women. It was because she is a leper. Therefore I sent her away from me."

" But why ? " stammered the Panjabi. " I am very sorry for it. The girl is too beautiful to suffer such a fate. But why send her away ? "

" Ah, I see that you don't understand. Do you know what they say in the big hospitals ? That to touch a leper is to become leprous ? One night with a leper girl will make a man a leper."

The Panjabi stared at him incredulously. "Then you too?" he said.

"Certainly. I too am bound to suffer. We will rot together. I and you, you whoreson scald, you son of a pig, meddler with our women, we will rot together. It may be years before the terrible signs appear. But appear they will. So wait, wait, wait."

Gamira was almost hysterical with rage and fear. "Yes, you are unclean. Everything she has touched is unclean. This is a house of doom; it faces south; you will drag your feet straight from your door to the City of Death. So wait, wait, wait. Your fate is written." His voice rose to a scream, and he turned and rushed out of the house, and down to the river. There he threw himself into the water, clothes and all, and plunged about madly, trying to free himself of the taint of that house. Panda Baba and Tiblu followed him, and when he was quieter, took him off to the bazaar to drink.

But the Panjabi sat still in the house. For a long hour, he sat motionless. Clouds drove up and obscured the sun. A chill wind blew through the open door. Then he got up. He pulled the clothes off the bed, he tore the clothes from his own body, till he was naked save for his loin-cloth, he carried them out to the back of his house, made a heap, poured oil upon it, lit it, and the flames devoured and purified nearly all that he possessed.

IV

That night Tiblu dreamt of Singaru. He saw her coming out of her house, down the moonlit village street, searching, searching for him, an intense longing in her eyes. And when she had found him, she sat beside him, and he explored for the first time the glory and mystery of her body; he tasted perfect rapture. When her spirit left him and he awoke, he knew his magic had been successful and she was ready. Early in the morning, while the mist still hung in the trees, and the fresh sun sparkled in the water, he went down to the river and waited for her. When she came, with tinkling anklets and her pitcher on her head, he called to her, and she followed him to a lonely spot under a group of trees.

"You came to me last night," he said.

"And you came to me the night before," she answered.

That was all that passed between them before he took her in his arms. They did not wait long; she smashed her pitcher on the river bank and hand in hand ran down the winding path into the forest. This time there was no unfriendly omen to stay their flight.

A little later that morning Tutta, dressed in a new dhoti, and a bundle of food on his back, went lumbering out of the village in search of Phulmat.

CHAPTER XIV

INVISIBLE WORM

ALL this time, Phulmat had been living quietly in Baihakapa. Baihakapa was one of those villages in the midst of the forest which served as a headquarters for all those pacific, law-abiding bandits who came to exploit and rob the Gonds. It was full of Panjabis in search of cheap buffaloes, Bengalis in search of cheap timber, Gujeratis in search of harra contracts, Banias with false measures, Kalars with adulterated liquor, Marwaris with bales of foreign cloth. The Gond quarter of Baihakapa was aloof from the rest but not safe from it—an endless succession of adventurers invaded its seclusion, to tempt, to trade, to demand cheap labour.

Phulmat had her little shop in the Gond quarter, and soon made herself at home, though the villagers were not the free and happy tribesmen she had been used to. They were nervous, suspicious, dishonest; they trusted no one; they were reserved and cautious in their speech. The contagion of civilization was upon them.

But they all liked Phulmat. Her gaiety and freshness delighted them. Her shop was always crowded, for those who came to buy tobacco generally preferred to sit and smoke at least one pipeful before they went away.

It was now that her courage and daring stood her in good stead; had she been of weaker mould, she must have become mistress to one of the merchants in the bazaar. But she was strong enough to live alone, in spite of all loneliness. She had many admirers, but not from the bazaar, when she first came to the village. But now her leprosy was making rapid progress. There was as yet no actual deformity, but there was the hint of it. Her fingers were slowly stiffening; there was a foul ulcer on her right foot; her face was gradually, imperceptibly, coarsening. Her admirers dropped away, her friends remained; she was always the best of company. The memory of Gamira was with her continually; her mind had always remained true to him, and now in her failing beauty and increasing weariness her heart clung to him more and more.

The day that Phulmat heard the *churel*, she had gone with the Baiga of Raspakri and a number of people from her own village to test the omens for rain. As they went along, the Baiga explained to them how his tribe knew all the secrets of Mother Earth. "We can read the flowers and fruits," he said.

There was a Brahmin—he had a flourishing business selling opium to the Gonds—in the party, and this made him very angry.

"What do you know, Baiga?" he exclaimed scornfully. "You can't read a single letter of the alphabet."

The Baiga laughed. "You can read your sacred books," he said. "You are a god among us. But you can't read the face of the earth. The earth is our mother

and we who honour her by refusing to tear open her breast with the plough, listen to all her secrets. Look at the parrot. If when a parrot is eating a mango it eats into the centre, and leaves the rest, then there will be good rain for two months but not the third. But if it eats the whole mango and drops it on the ground, then there will be rain all the year."

At last they found what they were looking for, a titur's nest with four eggs in it, and to their relief the eggs were all lying touching one another. "You see," said the Baiga, "if they had been lying apart there would have been poor rain and a scanty crop. If one of them had lain separate, in that direction there would have been famine. But this year we will do well."

He sat down; someone handed him a bottle of wine, a second bottle was shared by the company. But Phulmat did not stay to drink. She had remembered a day when she and Gamira had gone with Hothu for the same purpose, had found the eggs apart and what a bad year they had had. She went down to the river and walked sadly and slowly along the bank. Her sores were hurting her, and there was a great pain in her heart for Gamira. She remembered that she had no home.

All of a sudden she heard the crying of a child. There was nothing to be seen but dense forest everywhere, growing right down to the river bank on either side. It was a lonely, dangerous spot—what could a child be doing here? The cry came again, and again. It was passing slowly through the trees on the far side of the stream. But there was no one there. Phulmat stood

still, filled with a wild terror. She clutched the little crucifix, but no help came from it. She shook with fear. It must be a *churel*, she thought. A *churel* had gone to Tutta—but that was different. To men the *churel* was all enchantment and delight, luring them away to eat magic dangerous food of the other world ; but to women this sad and plaintive ghost of a mother who had died in childbirth was a thing of menace.

The *churel* was coming nearer—she must be searching for some girl in whose body she could take refuge—she was walking now through the trees, a child in her arms —the cry came again, and again nearer, it was very near the river. And there on the other bank Phulmat saw a little smoke rising, but there was no fire under it. And presently a line of ripples troubled the placid waters of the stream, furrowed it from side to side, then ceased. The *churel* had come. The whole world swam about her, a child's terrified cry rang in her ears, and she fell senseless to the ground.

After that the *churel* came on her daily. Her whole body trembled, there was fire in her belly. An overwhelming horror seized her, a sense of corruption and abomination. She felt as if she were being drawn slowly, but irresistibly, into the air, and then dropped down, down into appalling depths. Then her head began to shake, at first only a little trembling, but later to and fro so violently that her hair shook out wildly on every side, till she was sure she was going mad.

Above all she felt terror, a dread of the unseen visitor, and a longing for a child. She had never had a child

since that first one, long ago, that had died at birth. For a long time she had not minded, but now under the power of the *churel*, the longing came to her so strongly that it was an overwhelming, all-pervasive lust and passion of desire.

Then she ceased to recognize anyone, and for five days she neither ate nor drank. She lay in her shop motionless, and her customers went elsewhere. But she was loved in Baihakapa, and the villagers, growing frightened, sent for the best *gunia* they had. He was a dirty shambling old man with a long horse face, but he knew his business. In half an hour he had confirmed their suspicion of the *churel*, and had named the very woman who was the cause of the trouble. Then he drank a whole bottle of wine.

After a time, the *gunia* rose to his feet, swaying unsteadily, and glared wildly at Phulmat. All at once he himself fell into a frenzy. Round his waist was tied a chain of iron spikes. He undid it and began to beat the girl with it. One or two of the women standing round started forward to stop him, but he waved the chain at them with such ferocity that they fell back, alarmed. But Phulmat lay passive and indifferent; the blows did not seem to hurt her, and no blood flowed. Then the old man picked her up and stood her against the wall. He retreated a few steps and threw a small blunt dagger at her. Again and again he threw it, aiming at her breast, her legs, her belly. But she only stood there panting, and her head lolled to and fro.

" Make a fire," he ordered, and an old woman ran into her house and brought out a few logs, already alight, from her kitchen. " More, more," demanded the old man. " There must be a great blaze." He sent his son for some bones, and the boy soon returned with a whole armful and a couple of evil-smelling horse's hoofs. A small crowd had gathered now, some attracted by their affection for Phulmat, others by their desire to see what the *gunia* would do. There was a good deal of comment, for there was no standard treatment for such cases.

" My old man always gave pig's dung. . . ."

" Mixed with rotten coconut and denhu leaves. . . ."

" Put in a pipe and the smoke blown up the nose. . . ."

" The *churel* soon says : ' That's enough ; I'm off.' "

" It looks like a monkey with the wings of a chicken."

" Not the one I saw last year. It was up in a tree and was like a peacock. But its feet turned backwards. I tell you I ran and ran and ran."

There was a good blaze now. The *gunia* made his son throw all the bones into the heart of the fire, and place one of the hoofs where the blaze was brightest. Soon a foul smoke was rising, and the little crowd of onlookers rapidly dispersed. But one of the women, covering her face and eyes with her sari, came into the room with a little black pepper, powdered fine, on a leaf ; the *gunia* took a pinch of this and put it into Phulmat's eyes. This did at last rouse her ; she gave a loud cry, and began to rub her eyes till they were red and streaming with tears.

"Look," cried the *gunia* triumphantly, a smile of pleasure momentarily transforming his great haggard face. "It is beginning to work. She is feeling some pain; now the *churel* will leave her."

There was a small cot by the fire. He dragged Phulmat towards it and threw her on to it with her head towards the thickest of the smoke. Gasping for breath, and struggling hard to escape, she fought against him, but his strong hands held her there until she fainted in that evil mist. Then they carried her out into the street and began a dance of triumph round her.

When she recovered, she found that the *churel* had departed. Everyone was very kind to her after that, but she had grown angry with the village that could not make her the mother of a home. Then the men came from Chakmaktola, with stories of Galgal dancing, Bhuta drunken, Tiblu sitting disconsolate, scraps of news that she could not fit together, but things that she had seen and heard all those years with Gamira. They gave her the ring; she thought at first that it was from Gamira, and her disappointment was intense when they gave a vivid description of the crippled intoxicated Tutta. But afterwards, the ring comforted her: at least it was some kind of link with her old world. It made her restless, however. She pondered a pilgrimage, not yet to Amarkantak, but she had heard of a village, Chiraidongri, which was the special home of the Wind God whom she had always honoured. She might go there, for strength and cleansing. A fortnight later, while she was fetching water from the well, someone broke

into her house and stole all her scanty store of tobacco. That decided her. She would leave this village with its ill-omened name. That night, without farewells, she crept secretly out of her house, and by dawn was on the high road.

CHAPTER XV

MUDDY VESTURE

I

THE rains passed across the sacred Maikal Hills, clothing all their trees with greenery, the lights of another Diwali twinkled in a million homes, the bitter frost yielded in turn to stifling heat. In the Rest House at Musamundi, two men lay at ease in long cane chairs on the verandah. The house stood on a small hill and they looked down on to a little brown village scattered untidily among trees, and then behind and around mile upon mile of tall sal forest. It was a grand forest to see, rich and green, but unutterably remote. Its loneliness was like a spell ; you could never forget it.

One of the men, short, stout, pompous, carefully dressed in coat and trousers, wearing a smart solar topee even indoors, Mr. Duliram Nilkanth, the timber contractor for the Central Indian Railway, was talking.

"Yes," he was saying to his companion, a long thin mournful Anglo-Indian, John Peterson, an ill-paid subordinate engineer, who had ridden over on his bicycle to inspect a dangerous bridge : "Yes, there's only one way to deal with these Gonds—castrate the lot. Wipe 'em

out. India can't do with 'em. We want to be a great nation. So we will be, but we can't have a lot of jungle monkeys hanging on to our coat-tails. I once——"

"H'm," said Peterson mournfully. "Have you a spot of brandy anywhere handy?"

"Brandy?" Mr. Nilkanth sat up. "I have brandy? No, my friend. It would be against my religion to have brandy. It is against my patriotism too: every time we drink brandy we put more money into the pockets of those who are enslaving us."

"Oh," said Peterson, even more mournfully. "I see." He sank more deeply into his chair and brought out his pipe.

"These Gonds give me pain," went on Mr. Nilkanth, reverting to what was a favourite topic. "Do you know that when some Gond was awarded a medal for bravery—very unnecessary I thought it was—likely to raise 'em above themselves—the Governor couldn't pin it on him because he had no clothes except a loin-cloth. And he couldn't pin it there, ha-ha-ha, could he? It would look as if it were a reward for something else. Ha-ha."

Peterson had got his pipe going at last. "They don't work too badly," he said plaintively. "But in our department, of course, we pay them very well. Three and a half annas a day for men, and two and a half annas for women. Why, it's a fortune for them. No other department is decent and honest like ours. The police take most of their labour by force and never pay at all, and God knows what the forest people do. I knew a

ranger who paid his junglies with an occasional bottle of wine and some opium pills."

"What is there? It's the best way to keep 'em quiet. In some of these coal mines, I'm told, they actually encourage 'em to drink and smoke ganja, because then they get into debt, and the management gets some kind of hold over them. Otherwise they would always be running away. That's why I keep a Panjabi servant. They're afraid of him. You see, Mr. Peterson"—he half turned and leant over the side of his chair—"what you have always to remember about these junglies is that they've no sense of gratitude. I'll tell you a story about 'em. One of my men once saved the life of a Gond by giving his blood for a transfusion. Some time afterwards he was going with this very same Gond for some work, and he cut his finger. So he asked this fellow to urinate on it—you know what a good disinfectant that is—and he refused. That shows you the sort of people they are."

"Their women are rather beautiful," ventured Peterson.

Mr. Nilkanth snorted. "I hope you are not one of those sahibs who run after our Indian women," said he primly. "And I hope you won't be annoyed if as an elder man I give you some advice. Don't go to Gond girls; it's not worth it. Every single one of 'em has a disease. And if you pick up a disease from a Gond girl—well, you may know when you got it, but God only knows when you'll get rid of it."

Peterson got very red, and puffed furiously at his pipe. "That's my business, I think," he said shortly.

"Of course, of course. My dear fellow, I wouldn't stand in your way for a moment. I was only telling you the facts——"

"Which I suppose you think I've never heard of. Do you think I'm a child?" He got up and walked away angrily into the bedroom, and flung himself down on the bed. How wretched this life was, he thought, its loneliness was unbearable. No one to talk to except pompous old fools and wild villagers, no cinemas, no newspapers, no music, nothing. And no decent girls. It was impossible. Only last night he had gone out in the moonlight and looked at the little tumbledown huts, bearing all the tokens of poverty, but inside there was the warmth of a wood fire and men and women who, even if they lay on the ground, lay breast to breast. And he was alone.

Mr. Nilkanth called to him from the verandah. "Don't be angry, old fellow," he cried. "I'll show you some good girls to-night; we'll have a regular tamasha. One of the old men here knows many stories; we'll have him too, and lots of pretty girls."

II

Two roads lead to Musamundi, one a forest road broad and good so long as there is no rain, the other, made by the P.W.D., full of holes and cracks, hastily and parsimoniously repaired by the simple means of throwing earth upon its surface, earth that the least

touch of rain turns into unpassable mud. Both go through dense forest, one for ten miles to the next village, the other for eight down a steep hill, over which toil long lines of bullock-wagons bringing bamboo and timber to the towns.

Two roads lead to Musamundi, and along each stumbled a weary footsore figure, unaware of each other, unaware of their momentous convergence. Phulmat had walked fifteen miles that day and she had climbed the *ghat*, with no food save for a few handfuls of berries gathered by the roadside. After leaving Baihakapa she had wandered from place to place begging her way after the fashion of Pardhans, calling at the houses of those Gonds who were of her own Parteti clan. No Parteti Gond could refuse to give her food when she asked for it. But she always went veiled now. The disease had made its inevitable, appalling progress. Her feet had begun to suffer, several of her toes had gone. The second finger of her left hand, and the second and third fingers of her right were stunted. She felt rather than knew the ravages of her face.

That day, a mile out of Musamundi, where the two roads met, she sat down by a little pool of clear fresh water, shadowed by high rocks, and kneeling down took a long refreshing drink. Then as she raised herself, she saw her face reflected, at first not plainly, in the ruffled pool, but then as the waters stilled she saw with tragic clearness the thick ears and staring eyes, the nose flat, lips coarse, the debauched and hateful look. With a little gasp of terror she shrank back from that revealing

mirror, and drew her sari across her face again. Small wonder that no one made love to her now, she thought. And yet her body was beautiful as ever : nothing could destroy its poise and shapeliness.

She stood up and looked down the road. Surely there was something familiar in that man lurching along, coming so quickly and with so uneven a step. Yes, surely it was Tutta. She felt quite sick with the shock of recognition, of anticipation—surely Gamira had sent him to call her back. Why else should he be here in this remote and lonely spot ? She began to run towards him.

As she came nearer, she saw that it was certainly Tutta, a very weary, anxious and lonely Tutta. He, too, had not eaten all day ; he was consumed by a restless longing for some companionship. He had not yet recovered from the shock of finding, after a long and troublesome journey to Baihakapa, that Phulmat was not there. But with great courage he had continued the search, tracing her from village to village, growing always more ragged, always hungry, watching with sad wistful eyes the others take their pleasure. She had been the one perfect happiness of his life. But would he ever find her ? He looked up, and there, as in a dream, she was coming towards him. Her face was covered, but there was no mistaking that eager little body, and its queenly poise.

He was so tired that he could do no more than gurgle at her. She took him to the pool, where the water was so cool and clear, and made him drink and then rest in the shade, making a pillow for him in her lap.

There was a long silence.

"I have had no food to-day," said Tutta at last.

"Nor have I," she said.

There was another silence.

"How is he?" she asked after a time.

"He is well, and very rich," answered poor Tutta, thinking she would be pleased to know of Gamira's prosperity. "He has given Adri three silk saris, and ornaments for her head and neck and arms. She is clothed in silver."

She stiffened, jerked his head off her lap. So he had forgotten her, never spoke of her, gave all that to Adri. He had never given her so much. What traitors men were, minding their food and their lust—that was all they minded. Her heart filled with rage against them all.

But Tutta was looking at her, with intense longing and devotion.

"What is the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Why are you angry? I was only telling you what had happened."

"Tell me he doesn't love her, and I'll live with you for ever," she cried. "Tell me he sleeps apart, and you can do anything with me."

"But he does love, and sleeps with her every night," said Tutta, uncomprehending.

"Oh, how I hate you! You rascal, I could kill you! It can't be true that he gave her all those things."

"That is true. But she doesn't love him. She will leave him soon. . . ."

"What did you say? She will leave him?" Her voice thrilled with exultation. "Then I'll love you always." And impetuously she flung her arms about his neck.

Now it was his turn to be thrilled. His heart leapt with pleasure. "I have never forgotten you," he whispered. "Every day I have thought of you. I have seen you in my dreams."

"Yes," she thought. "He and I are alike. There is one fate written in our foreheads. We are both broken and useless."

"Show me your face," he begged. But she drew away from him, and laughed. "No, that sun is hidden now." She could not bear to shock him, not yet. He must be thinking that she was beautiful as ever.

"But I will show you this," she said, struck by a sudden idea. "It is a charm a sadhu gave me. Very often it doesn't work."

And she pulled out the little crucifix and offered it to him.

He started back, alarmed, for you can never be sure of these things, then sniffed at it cautiously. "What can it do?" he asked.

"I thought once that it was going to cure me, but it hasn't. But it does do one thing—it keeps alive my love, and I never can get angry with him"—Tutta knew that she was thinking of Gamira, but, of course, she could not use her husband's name—"and sometimes when I touch it, if I have a lot of pain, then I feel happy."

"Oh," said Tutta, his interest fading; he was not interested in charms that reminded Phulmat of Gamira. "I thought it was something useful. But it does stop the pain?"

"No, not exactly stop it," she admitted. "But it makes me happy in spite of it."

"That's not possible," objected Tutta. "The only thing that would do that is two bottles of wine."

"Perhaps. Who knows?" she answered. Then her attention was caught by the two visitors from the Rest House coming along the road. Mr. Nilkanth was talking loudly, Peterson listening in gloomy boredom. When she saw them, Phulmat got up and stood with her back to the road. They stared curiously, appraisingly, at her erect, slim figure; every line of it called to them. Tutta salaamed deeply, raising his claw hand to his forehead. "Huzoor, huzoor," he said.

But when they had passed, he remarked: "Those two bulls were looking at you."

"Of course," she said placidly.

"My queen," he entreated suddenly, trembling at his courage. "Let me sleep with you to-night."

"Why not?" she said casually; her thoughts were far away, in Mulmula, chasing Gamira with rage and love and hatred. Sleep with Tutta? Why not? They were both of one fate, ruined and outcast, hideous and despised. Yes, certainly, she would give him a little happiness.

"Why not?" she repeated, smiling at him.

They got up then and went to the village. She

searched till she found a house of the Parteti clan, and going in gave the Pardhan's blessing.

"Eat, drink and be happy," she said. "This was the blessing that Raita and Bariya gave us. We give it to you. And as we give you blessing, so give us food and drink, and then we will be happy too."

Hearing that, the goodwife of the house came out. "Sit down, my daughter," she said. "You seem tired and sad. But the food is almost ready, and you shall have all you want."

When they had eaten, and evening had come on, the headman went round the village calling for a dance. Phulmat and Tutta were feeling much better now, and they at once got up and went to the Rest House. There they found the two sahibs sitting on the verandah, and round them gathered a small group of villagers. An old Pardhan was standing before them, telling a story.

"He is a Raj-Pardhan," whispered Phulmat. "They tell of marvels. We must listen to him."

CHAPTER XVI

PILLAR OF FIRE

"IN PALINAGRI," the old man was saying, "there once lived Singisurwa, the son of Parewa, the son of Arewa the king. In the fort of Chanda there lived Bhogi Bila Singh Raja who was very wealthy and feared no man. Now one day Singisurwa went to Chanda to get the king's daughter for marriage with his son. He rode on the great horse, whose name was Hansdhar. When he reached Chanda he camped in the king's flower-garden before the fort. That fort was seven stories high, and all round it there were secret traps so that anyone who tried to get in was caught. Every gate was guarded by twelve soldiers. One morning the king went to the top of the fort and looked down, and there he saw this huge horse like an elephant trampling down his flowers. The king said: 'For twenty-four years I have had no visitor. Now who is this who has come on his little pony to see me? Go, seize him, and bring him a prisoner to me.'

"But Singisurwa was a very clever king. When he slept he always had one eye and one ear open. He pitched his tent and fixed it with twelve golden pegs. The king's servants came to the tent and spoke roughly to him. 'Go and tell your master,' he said, 'that I am

Singisurwa, son of Parewa, son of Arewa, kings of Palinagri, and I have come to seek the king's daughter in marriage for my son.' When the Chanda king heard this message he was very angry. 'From generation to generation,' he said, 'we have ruled here, and now this man comes and sends me such a message.' So he ordered his captains to prepare for war, and they got ready all their instruments and coats of mail, their swords and spears. But Singisurwa had slept eight days and nine nights, and the weariness of his journey had gone from him. Round him he gathered all the spirits of the unseen world. The Earth Mother was there beside him, and Basu-mata on whose head rests the world. There was Agyadanu, the lord of fire, and Baitaldanu, who directs the whirlwind, Alopurbi and Kunkalni, Raktipurbi and Chatiburma, Mata Kotma, Mata Gandani, the black and wicked she-devils Sankani Dankani and Chilkni Chabni, wasps and hornets, the stump of wood that flies through the forest by night, Hatyamatya the whirlwind, Singitumi that has all the spirits of the night within it. These were his army; he himself lay in a deep sleep. Then this host of spirits and ghosts attacked the army of the Chanda king, and killed half his soldiers. The great horse stood watching the battle; it went to the tent and kicked Singisurwa awake. 'Why are you sleeping?' it asked. The king got up, put on his armour, leapt on his horse, and away they went through the sky. As an arrow flies through the air, so did that horse. Then the horse came down to the earth in the midst of the king's army, and they killed

and killed and killed and killed till only the king was left. So now the two kings began to fight. For eight days and nine nights they fought, and at last it chanced that Singisurwa, son of Parewa, son of Arewa, kings of Palinagri, fell off his horse into the secret pit where all the Chanda king's armoury was. There the king locked him up.

"Then the great horse, Hansdhar, grew very angry, and with its hoofs it kicked and kicked and kicked, till it had destroyed all that a horse could destroy, and it galloped back to Palinagri. It went on and on and on, the heat of the sun above, the burning earth below. In the jungle there was a king—Dinga-machi-kowa was his name—and he had three times twenty wives. He had a well surrounded by snares so that no animal or bird could go near to drink his water. There was a tree by the well, on which hung a long sword, and if anyone came near, the sword made a *taon taon taon* noise. The horse was very thirsty and went to the well. At once the sword began to give its warning. The king and his court had been out hunting, but when they found the horse drinking they were very angry and tried to catch it. But it kicked some of them, and bit some of them, and flew up into the air, and at last it reached Palinagri.

"Now Singisurwa's wife, Lingarani, was looking out down the jungle road. When she saw the horse she began to weep. 'Why have you come alone?' she cried. The horse told her the whole story. 'Your king is dead,' it said.

" The son of Singisurwa was named Palibirwa. He was five years old. When he saw his mother weeping and the horse alone he asked what had happened. When he heard the story the boy took a bath. Then he offered water to the tulsi, he honoured the five spirits, touched the bosom of Mother Earth with his forehead, settled all the affairs of the kingdom, said good-bye to his mother, jumped on to the horse and crying : ' I'm going to see what that king has done to my father,' he flew up into the air.

" There was a blackbird sitting on a tree in the jungle. As they flew by the bird began to talk. The horse stopped and the boy said : ' Why are you troubling us ? Shall I kill it ? ' he asked the horse. ' No, don't kill it,' replied Hansdhar, ' but eat a little betel and spit the juice into its mouth. That will be the token. Then if anything happens to us on the way we'll know whose fault it was.'

" So they did this and went on their way. After a time they came to a pipal tree where Rani Gidal had her home. This vulture had twelve children, but ten of them had been eaten by a cobra. As Palibirwa came there he saw the cobra coming down the tree. ' What shall I do ? ' he asked the horse. ' Kill it, kill it,' it said. So he killed it, and was about to go away when the two baby vultures said : ' Don't go away so soon : you have saved our lives.' But he said : ' We must go, or your mother will kill us.' ' No,' they cried. ' We promise she wont.' And they caught hold of him and the horse, and hid them behind the tree. Then Rani Gidal came

flying slowly through the sky. She had twelve dead animals for her twelve children, five in her beak, five on her back, two in her claws. When she came to the tree she cried : ' I smell man's flesh. How is that ? ' ' That is nothing,' said the children. ' We've been eating man's flesh, and so we smell of it. Come and see.'

" When she came down from the tree she saw the great body of the cobra cut into pieces. ' Whoever killed this enemy be blessed,' she said. ' It was surely he who killed my children. Who has done this good deed ? '

" ' We wont show you,' they answered. ' You'll kill them.' ' I'll eat your flesh first,' she replied. So when she had promised that, they brought out the child and the horse. The old queen was very pleased, and patted the horse's head. ' Go with my blessing,' she said. ' If any trouble comes, all you need do is to call on my name and I will help you.'

" Then the boy went on and came to Chanda. There he made his camp. He had a tent with golden pegs, he had a golden mattress on his bed, the nails were of gold with pearl heads, the bedding was of silk. There he went to sleep. The King of Chanda was the lord of thirty-six other kings, twenty-one princes, the wealthy citizens of two-and-fifty towns ; this was his durbar. He said : ' All this is mine, but now another enemy has come.'

" Then the boy started the war. He got up early in the morning and let the horse destroy the king's garden. Then he went to bathe in a beautiful well with a golden slab on which the princesses of Chanda washed their

clothes. When the boy had bathed he threw mud into the well. The fish and the tortoises came up and, putting their heads out of the water, looked at him with fear. Then he broke that slab so violently that a bit of it hit the king's elephant and it died. With his left hand the boy threw the rest of the slab and it killed half the king's durbar. Thus the war began. As they fought, the dry earth became a swamp, the swamp became a river flowing with blood ; in every river the fish gasped for breath. In the rivers they made a snake the watchman and a crocodile the headman, and they all rushed out of the little streams to the Narbada. But though there was trouble for the fish, the beasts of the forest were pleased. They rushed out of their hiding-places to devour the dead bodies. The hyena asked them : 'Where are you all going ?' They answered : 'A saviour has come. Our fields are ripe, and we are going to reap them.'

"They fought and fought and fought till the whole world was dry and weary. The fish had no water save the sweat of the warriors. But at last the King of Chanda was killed. The boy took his head in his hands and said : 'I will take this back to my own kingdom, and put it on a pole so that all the birds can peck at it. I have won everything, save my father.'

"Then the boy caught the queen, seized her by the hair, and cried : 'I am going to beat you on your face till you tell me where my father is.' She said : 'Here I live hidden in this great palace : how should I know where your father is ? I see nothing but these golden

swings which are rocked to and fro by yellow, green and red girls, who hold in their hands yellow, green and red parrots in golden cages. These are my friends. What do I know of men ? '

" That queen had a little daughter, Rani Gaila, six months old. The boy went away and at last he found the armoury, and there his father was hanging between earth and heaven, stuck on to the spears where he had fallen. The boy took the name of Mother Earth and Thakur Deo, and restored his father to life.

" Then the father said to his little son : ' Come, boy, we will go with this little girl, and make her your wife.' They went away on the horse, flying through the air till they returned home. There they saluted every tribe with its proper greeting, and the boy cried out : ' Here is the head of our enemy ; here is my bride ; here is my father safe home again.'

" But they all said : ' You have taken a girl without marrying her properly. So you must give a tribal dinner. So the king gave a dinner that cost twenty-five thousand rupees. And then everyone was happy. The boy-king came to the throne, and the queen was in her golden cradle, rocked to and fro by yellow, green and red girls."

Peterson got up and yawned wearily. " I've never heard such stuff," he said. " Come, let's have something a little more exciting. Where are these nice girls of yours ? "

" Headman," shouted Mr. Nilkanth, " make your

people dance. It's getting late. Why haven't they come?"

"Yes, huzoor, at once, huzoor," said the headman, and bustled away to recruit dancers and drummers. But this was not easy, for Mr. Nilkanth was cordially hated by the entire village for his bullying ways and his meanness in making money-payments. At first only half a dozen young men responded. They stood in a slightly embarrassed group in front of the Rest House, two of them beating on the drums that were hung at their waists. There were no women at all. The headman was in despair. At last he brought two old women of his own household, and they, taking hands, began to dance in front of the men, and to sing in thin cracked voices.

"Is this all you can do?" roared Peterson at the headman. "Who is that girl over there? Why isn't she dancing?" Ever since Phulmat had come, his eyes had never left her. The headman went over to her.

"Please dance, girl," he said, "or the sahib will give me a great deal of trouble."

She shook her head. Then he got angry, caught her by the hand, and dragged her to her feet. "Come along," he said roughly. "And you, too," he added, turning to Tutta. As they were both secretly longing to dance they made no further protest, and Phulmat ran to the side of the old women, allowed one of them to clasp her hand, and at once began to lead the singing. Directly Phulmat joined it the dance became a thing of art and beauty. Was she not the daughter of a king-

fisher, and had she not learnt to dance in the highlands of Amarkantak, where they dance better than anywhere in the world ?

O the big cows and the little cows !
All their horns are long.
They are climbing up the mountain-side.
The herdsman follows, then he disappears.
While she is searching for her lord,
Another comes—hey-ho, how fine he looks.
He snatches at her dress.
She says, Let go, or I'll scream for all the village.
O the big and little cows !
O their horns are very long !
He says, I'll never let you go
Until you lie with me.
Hey-ho the mountain !
O the big and little cows !
Their horns are very long !

So they sang, the women swaying to and fro, the men thumping on the drums, and shouting louder and louder as the intoxication of the rhythm grew upon them. Peterson watched entranced. In the moonlight the veiled form of Phulmat looked inexpressibly alluring. The darkness hid the pitiful deformity of her hands and feet. But Mr. Nilkanth was also moved. In the middle of the second song he slipped out of his chair, and called the headman to the back of the house, where he had a short but earnest consultation with him. When

he came back Peterson jumped up and stood over him.

"What were you talking to that man about?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing. Only arranging about to-morrow's food. We've run out of *ghee*."

"That's a lie. Out with it. He's going to get you that girl."

Mr. Nilkanth was embarrassed. "I don't do that sort of thing," he protested.

"Oh yes, you do. Do you think he'll get her?"

The other nodded. "The headman says she's hungry."

"But I must have her. You must let me have her, Nilkanth. You promised me." He was trembling with excitement.

"Don't worry old boy." The contractor was almost paternal. "It was for you I was arranging it. I'll go over to that little house." He pointed to a small hut about a hundred yards away. "And then when I've fixed everything up, I'll call you."

The dancers had changed their rhythm and were going round and round in a wide circle. More women had joined now, and they were all singing, delightedly following Phulmat's lead. "*O green Diwali*," she sang. It was their favourite song at Mulmula.

O green Diwali! O green Diwali! We shall meet, we shall meet at Diwali!
Wherever we be, our spirits will meet.

The swan will not remain, though you tempt him with costly pearls.
He longs for his own country.
O Diwali ! O green Diwali !

As she sang the last words of the song, so great a desire for Gamira possessed her, she remembered so vividly the last time she had sung the song, he dancing before her with his drum, that she could go on no longer. She broke away from the line, and ran out of the compound towards the little house where she was to stay for the night. Like an arrow, the headman was after her.

" The sahib will give you five rupees if you will sleep with him to-night," he whispered.

She stopped dead and stared at him, not fully understanding.

" Don't be angry, girl," he said. " It is nothing. He is a good sahib. He will give you a big *baksheesh*."

She made no answer. " Tutta," she called loudly. " Tutta." And then raising her stunted hand, she struck the man violently in the face and walked away.

The headman returned to the Rest House to find Mr. Nilkanth waiting for him. " What does she say ? Will she come ? " he asked eagerly.

The villager dared not tell the truth. " If you will go to that little house in half an hour," he began, but he got no further, for Peterson appeared and caught Nilkanth by the shoulders. " Don't you let me down," he said, " remember you promised me."

"Don't get so excited," said Mr. Nilkanth severely. "One would think you were a newly married husband. Keep quiet."

"Anyway, let's stop the dance," urged Peterson. "It will get too late otherwise. These people usually dance all night."

"Very good. Headman, that's enough. Take your people away to the village and let them dance in your house. To-morrow I'll give you your *baksheesh*."

"*Hookum, huzoor, hookum*." Salaaming deeply, the headman went out, broke into the midst of the dancers, and told them to go and finish in the village. Grumbling a little, for the ground there was very good for dancing, and not sure about their *baksheesh*, they went away. Tutta accompanied them. "Don't come to my house for some time," Phulmat had told him. "I will wait for you there."

Directly Mr. Nilkanth heard the dance begin again in the village he went to the little hut where Phulmat, her heart full of Gamira, was sitting over a small fire of cow-dung. She had completely forgotten the headman's proposal when there was a timid knocking at the door, and supposing it to be Tutta, she got up to let him in. But as she put her hand to the latch she heard the sahib's voice outside.

"Let me in, girl," he pleaded. "I have been mad for you from the moment I saw you."

She stood quite still inside, really frightened. Would Tutta come in time to help her? she wondered.

Tutta soon tired of the dance, for indeed without

Phulmat the villagers performed very indifferently, and as soon as possible he bade the headman farewell and left the house. He had never been quite so happy before. To-night he would be with the queen of whom he had dreamed for years, she would be in his arms, he knew that she would not be like the other girls who mocked at his clumsy movements. All paradise awaited him. Then as he came within sight of the hut he saw a white-clad figure at its door. He stopped : it was one of those bulls from the Rest House after his girl. He started forward, then stopped again. What could he do ? If he roused the village they would laugh at him ; if he attacked the sahib he might get killed. He halted again, in an agony of uncertainty.

Nilkanth's first bewilderment when Phulmat refused to open the door had changed to an intense irritation. He was determined to have this girl. He banged on the door. Nothing happened. He put his hand through the crack and tried to force the chain. It was too tightly fixed, his pushing against the door had apparently jammed it. Then he thought, I'll frighten her out, and taking a pipe-lighter from his pocket he ignited it, and held the tiny flame to the thatch. It caught immediately. I'll smoke her out, he grinned triumphantly.

And then from across the field he heard a shout and a man running, and in an instant he realized his own danger. There was a law about seduction. He ran back to the shelter of a clump of trees.

The thatch took light with astonishing rapidity. Before Phulmat had properly understood what was

happening the whole roof was ablaze. Then in the urgency of that moment she lost her head. She beat at the door frantically, heard Tutta's voice outside, fumbled at the chain. But it had jammed somehow, and now Tutta was also trying to force the door from outside, which made it still harder to open. The hut was full of smoke, she was suffocating ; wild with terror, she stood paralysed of motion before the door. Then it flew open. Tutta almost fell into the hut. Through the smoke he saw her standing there. He seized her, and with a great push sent her flying through the door, stumbled himself and fell headlong. At that moment the roof crashed down upon him. A column of fire shot swiftly upwards.

CHAPTER XVII

FROZEN BED

I

MEANWHILE, in Mulmula, life was taking its accustomed course. Tiblu and Singaru had returned, amazingly happy, and were established in a tiny hut in a corner of Putchi's compound. Tok Singh, driven to despair, had run off with Dariya's wife. Dariya went to the police station to complain, but Panda Baba got there first and bribed the munshi so that all Dariya got was a beating for his pains. But in the village, Panda Baba and all his family were in deep disgrace. Their son had gone off with a Pankin. It was a great come-down. Ganpat, when he was drunk, mocked him openly in the street. The old Baiga settled permanently in Hothu's house, and people came even from the Chakmaktola bazaar for his advice. No one would eat with Panda or share his pipe. But the social boycott went no further than that. The village could still drink with him, which, after all, was the important thing, and he was not debarred from any of his usual religious duties. He would give a tribal dinner soon, he told them all, and make recompense for his son's stupidity.

Putchi was also in trouble. It was his duty to collect the cattle-tax. But this year when the Ranger sent for the money, it was not to be found. On the other hand, both Putchi's wives had new ornaments and clothes. He had gone to Tiharu for help, and this had led to a terrible quarrel with Sitaram the Ahir, for the old witch had demanded the ear of a buffalo to strengthen her charm, and Putchi had thought it would be more economical to remove the ear quietly from one of Sitaram's buffaloes than from his own. So it would have been, had not Sitaram caught him trying to do it.

And Gamira—he had begun to think again of Phulmat, with desire and dread. Every morning, when he sat in his field, a little brass pot of water by his side, he would feverishly examine himself for any trace of leprosy. He had an idea that the disease would start dramatically, catastrophically ; a toe would drop off ; a finger would rot away ; a great sore would break out on his thighs. Carefully he passed his hands over his body ; he was fatter, yes, there was a lot of flesh on his limbs ; his neck had got a little thick ; it was no wonder, for he was now the richest man in the village. He would have been very happy but for this fear that never left him. During the past two years he had watched Satula's loveliness slowly pass from her ; she could only use one hand now ; it was pathetic to see her trying to bathe Julan, whom she still tended with all the old devotion. Nanas also had a patch on his cheek ; Julan said it was the beginning. But it was Satula who frightened Gamira. Every time he saw her hands or feet he shuddered. But he had come

to love and admire her ; the old enmity had gone. Her gentleness and unfailing cheerfulness were in sharp contrast to the storms that ravaged Adri's beauty.

That fire had sunk to a cinder. Gamira could not stir it. He believed that no one could stir it. But here he was wrong. A few months before, Sitaram the Ahir had suddenly taken significance in Adri's mind. Certainly he was very handsome, tall and proud with his long black hair, and skin of perfect bronze. He was clever, he could imitate birds and animals and the weeping of an old woman for her dead child. He acted as midwife for all the cattle in those villages. He was vigorous ; he swung forward in his walk, gloriously balanced, the slight movement of his shoulders was itself an invitation to love.

He had no money, of course. But he was strong, and a worker. She probably would have enough for them both, at any rate to begin with. The ornaments in her possession must be worth at least a hundred rupees. Not that there was any need to consider that for the moment. She did not want to run away with Sitaram at present, but he stirred her fire.

After all, Gamira was the richest man in the village. He was proud, but not to her ; hard, but not in her presence ; to her he remained the perfect lover ; he did all the right things, and he did them with passion ; but she was used to him now, and she remained neutral, bored, inert.

He had not given her a child. It was his fault, though he would never admit it. After all, he had not given

Phulmat a child either. And Adri wanted to be a mother, to have Julan Devi tattooed on her body, to gain the added prestige of motherhood, to know the rich excitement of that relation. So she was petulant with this sterile husband, pushed him aside, resisted his embraces. "What a bull you are!" she would say. "Go away, it's too hot, it's too cold." Or again: "What do you want to tumble me like this for? You are tearing my clothes. Go away, and let me alone."

People began to laugh at her, to suggest—for many were jealous of them—that Gamira was impotent. One night, when the young men of the village were dancing the Saila, she went by, and they changed their song at once.

A Pardhan woman cannot get a child.
Hey-ho, however much she tries.
She eats a little mouse.
Hey-ho, however much she tries.
She gobbles up a tiger.
Hey-ho, however much she tries.
She even eats a frog.
Hey-ho, she cannot get a child.

Long after she had taken refuge in her kitchen she could hear them shouting the hateful song, and all the village laughing.

Once she thought that she really was going to have a child, and for a month she cherished that happiness, refusing carefully to clean the house with white earth,

turning aside from horses in the road. But one evening, going with Gamira to the Chakmaktola bazaar, she crossed the Narbada. That night Mother Narbada herself appeared to her in a dream and said that as she had insulted her by crossing her proud waters in that state she would not have a child after all. And the next morning Adri knew that her dream was true. And since it was Gamira who had taken her to the bazaar she laid the guilt on him, and they had a long and bitter quarrel.

That was a dreadful day when she heard that Singaru was pregnant, a still more tragic day when the child was born, a lovely boy. Everyone was pleased about it. Satula was all day in the house ; Tigli came and sat with Julan by the hour, recounting every detail. Panda Baba was in his element trying to discover what ancestor had been reborn in the child. He found a small mark that reminded him, so he said, of Putchi's grandfather, and when he had announced this, Tigli washed the boy's feet, and Putchi brought an old ring of his grandfather's and hung it round his neck by a string. Then Panda Baba laid his hands on the baby's head, and told him to drink, for he was among his friends, and had no need for fear. And the child, who till that moment had obstinately refused to drink, now went to Singaru's breast with a little grunt of content.

Adri could not bring herself to go into the house, but she hung about outside, because she knew that sooner or later they might bring out the umbilical-cord and hide it somewhere. And if only she could get hold of that she

could transfer Singaru's fertility to herself. All night she watched, and a little before dawn she was rewarded. Panda Baba and Tiblu came very quietly out of the house, followed by an old woman. They went to the manure heap behind Putchi's house, and there in the fitful light of a waning moon, they buried something. Adri knew what it was, knew also that they were burying it there in the dung-heap so that the child would grow strong and fat. Directly they were gone she went noiselessly to the spot and unearthed the little bundle. She clasped it to her breast and hurried home.

As soon as day broke, Adri went into the forest and searched till she found a great saj tree. She looked everywhere to see that she was not observed, and then stripping off all her clothes, removing even her ornaments, she stood naked before it and prayed to Bara Deo and to Julan Devi, goddess of the cradle, for a child. She held the little bundle containing the life-cord of Singaru's son to her heart, and with tears running down her face begged the Great God to come to her. Such things had been : the spirit of the tree might overshadow her : she looked with straining eyes for any stirring of the leaves. But there was no answer ; only Pawan Dassorie moved a little in the topmost branches. The great tree was silent.

II

The rains that year were very heavy and, when they slackened, there was a lot of fever in the village. Gamira

was one of the first to be taken ill, suddenly, in the middle of the afternoon. Adri, coming in with a basket of kachnar flowers, sweet-smelling, rose-purple, for their supper, heard him crying : " Phulmat, Phulmat, this is the beginning, this is the beginning."

She put down her basket on the verandah and hurried into the dark hot room, full of acrid smoke. Gamira was tossing to and fro on his narrow bed, burning with fever, muttering constantly to himself. " It has come, it has come," he moaned. He was sure that this was the beginning of leprosy. Towards evening the fever rose alarmingly, and he cried out incessantly. Adri, now really frightened, ran to fetch Panda Baba.

" A spirit has attacked him," she said. " I think Phulmat must have sent it, for when it rides on him he calls her name again and again."

Panda Baba came to see. " You had better send someone for three bottles of wine," he said. " Meanwhile I'll bring some medicine, and then I will sit with Tiblu in the other room."

In a few minutes he was back. " Here," he said, " I have a pill, given by an old man in Musamundi, who was very wise. It is compounded of the milk of a tiger, crocodile's bile, and the egg of a crane. Let him swallow it, and the fever will certainly depart." They made Gamira take the pill, then Panda Baba called Tiblu who was now almost a real *gunia* himself, and the two went into another hut and began their magic.

By midnight Gamira was sleeping peacefully. Panda Baba was triumphant. " Certainly," he said, " it was a

spirit that was troubling him, but not one sent by Phulmat, but by another woman who seeks his love. I have promised that we will offer a black goat in ten days' time. And now perhaps . . ." He indicated with a nod of his head the bottles of wine that were standing invitingly against the wall. He felt pleased. Another triumph. Surely his *gunia* was powerful. He did not think it necessary to tell them all that his pill was mostly made of opium, the effects of which Gamira was now sleeping off. He had almost forgotten the fact himself. He really believed the improvement was due to his magic.

But the next day Gamira's fever returned, and it was now worse than before. In his delirium he was haunted by one dream. He saw himself wandering along a great bare mountain-side, his hands and feet shapeless stumps, his face deformed and hideous. He was trying desperately to reach the summit, but those ravaged feet refused to carry him. Then just ahead he saw Phulmat, standing as she used to stand, a pillar of brown delight. Repeatedly he cried : " Phulmat, Phulmat."

The day had come when Putchi's consecrated and castrated pig must die. The Pardhan household was pleased when they heard of the approaching ceremony, the Laru, done in honour of Narayan Deo for the protection of the village. For if the village was protected, surely it would mean some relief also for Gamira. Julan decided to consult the Baiga about it. After all, Panda Baba was hardly in a position to grumble nowadays, now that he had mixed himself up with Pankas. When the Baiga came he took Gamira's hand, pulled out each

of the fingers till they cracked, held the wrist to his ear and listened with deep attention. Then he sat down and taking two bits of stick of equal length, held them together and began to measure them by the breadth of his right hand. After doing this some twenty times, he declared that one of the sticks had grown a little in length and that this meant that it was no other than Narayan Deo himself who had sent the sickness. Undoubtedly, therefore, Gamira must be present at the Laru ceremony, and it would do him good.

Adri watched with great anxiety, and when the Baiga had gone she herself examined Gamira. Suppose after all he was to be a leper. It would not be very pleasant to have to spend the rest of her life nursing a Julan who had not Julan's brains. Would it not be better to escape now, before the danger of the disease fell on her also ? She had no faith in the Laru ceremony nor in Panda Baba's magic to cure Gamira. She was certain that the illness had been sent by Phulmat, who had enlisted the support of some very powerful spirit, one far too strong for their poor little village wizards. The thought of Sitaram recurred to her, it persisted. A strong, clean man, and new.

She went and stood in the street outside the house. Perhaps she might see him bringing back the cattle. Someone coughed behind her, a timid, deprecating cough. It was Bhuta. He looked very wild. Two men went by carrying a great log of char wood for the Laru. When they had gone :

" I hear Gamira is very ill," he said politely.

" Certainly," she said coldly. From within the house they could hear the roar of the grindstone, and above it Gamira's voice crying : " Phulmat, Phulmat."

Bhuta slightly raised his eyebrows, but said nothing.

Adri was furious. " It is a *bhut* she has sent to trouble us," she explained angrily.

" If it is the *bhut* of leprosy," said Bhuta very quietly, " it would be well for her to return to him, so that they might care for one another."

She stared at him, genuinely astonished at his daring, intrigued also that he should have so exactly interpreted her own thought.

He came nearer. " Girl," he said, looking round to see if anyone was about, " I have a present for you. For these three years I have loved you." He thrust a small packet into her hand, and was gone, a timid, almost servile, figure, very unlike the menacing dominating Bhuta she had known.

She was bewildered, frightened, angry. What was this present ? She opened the packet and found a pair of beautiful silver *dhar*. They are certainly beautiful, she thought, but not more than twelve rupees. Does the fool think he can seduce me with a *dhar* ? And to make love to me in the street, in the middle of the morning ! What a mad fool he is ! All the same she was pleased. The more money she could get the better, if she was really going to run away. That man at Chakmaktola would buy her *karanphul*, and she could wear these instead. With the chains just kissing her cheeks, she would look very well. She would tell

Gamira that they used to belong to her mother long ago.

She could not resist them. She fitted them into her ears, and ran into the house. Julan greeted her with a little grunt of astonishment, then she went in to Gamira. He was sitting up in bed wrapped in a blanket, gazing blankly into the fire. At once he noticed the *dhar*.

"Where did you get them?" he demanded, jealous and suspicious.

"They are my mother's," she said. "A man came over from our village two days ago and gave them to me. You were ill, that's why you didn't see him."

"Come here and let me look at them."

She bent down, and he removed one of them from her ear. O the smell of the wood-smoke in her hair! He ached for her. Then on the *dhar* he noticed certain marks. Astounded he examined it more closely. "Give me the other," he said, trying to speak calmly. Yes, there could be no doubt. These were Phulmat's *dhar*, stolen from his house all those years ago. The room swam about him. He thought he would die, so intense was the rage that possessed him.

"You thief," he shouted. "These are Phulmat's *dhar*. When did you take them? Why did you do it? Where did you find them?"

Adri was frightened. How was she to explain? "I found them under the roof," she hazarded.

"Show me the place."

She pointed at random.

"Liar. I have looked there myself. In every

corner of this house I have searched. Go away, you thief and traitor. I won't have you here. Go ! And I shall keep these and give them back to Phulmat when she returns to me."

Adri went out, frightened and angry. It had come sooner than she intended, but now she would certainly run away with the Ahir. She walked boldly up the hill to the place where the cattle were resting in the shade of a great tree. Sitaram was there, sitting alone, playing his flute. The music thrilled her as she came nearer.

She went up to him, and stood there for a moment. Their eyes met. " Come, Ahir," she said. " Let us go."

" To-night," he agreed. " Have you money ? "

" Yes," she answered. " Shall we meet here ? While they are all watching the Laru ? "

" This is the best place. I know a path through the forest. We will go to my uncle's house. It is four days' journey, and they will never find us. At the first squealing of the pig we will both start."

It was very simple. Neither of them mentioned Sitaram's own wife and family. They would manage somehow. The tribe would look after them. With no more talk than that, Adri went back to the village. On the way she met Bhuta who had in fact been following her.

" I heard there was a quarrel," he said eagerly. " Now why not come to me ? "

An idea struck her. She smiled at him, then covered her face shyly. " Yes," she whispered. " I will come."

" When ? "

"To-night. Meet me down by the river at the foot of the hill during the Laru, when they begin to serve out the food." She remembered that the serving of the food is done two or three hours after the squealing of the pig. "But have you money?" she went on.

"Lots and lots of it," he replied, exulting.

"Then give me some."

"Why? You don't need any."

"Yes I do. I've a lot of debts, and if they're not settled they may send the police after us."

Anything better than that, he thought. "How much do you want?"

"At least three score."

He trembled. It was preposterous, half his fortune. But he must have the girl. He was sick with passion. He would give his life for her, so what was sixty rupees. He went quickly home, and from the darkest corner of his hut dug up his carefully hoarded savings. He counted out three score, and took them to Adri.

"When I have taken my husband to Putchi's house I shall go away to get my things ready and pay these debts. You stay there and don't let him leave the house. And then when they serve the food, come down to the river." Those were her instructions. She gave him a dazzling smile—mistaking its cause, he was flattered by the triumph in it—and she darted into the house.

By evening the whole village, and a good many visitors, had gathered in Putchi's house. Gamira had been carried down on Hothu's back, but Julan had preferred to crawl along the road at his own pace. A

pit was ready on the threshold, and near it was the heavy char log that had been brought in from the jungle that morning. There were three tins of wine, and everyone began to be very drunk.

"*Tere nare nana re nana saheb tere nare nana re nana,*" they shouted. Tiblu was holding the pig, and presently Putchi staggered to his feet and walked unsteadily over to his son. "Give it to me, whoreson dog," he shouted. Tiblu beamed with pleasure and pushed the black ugly animal into his father's hands. It kicked furiously, and was on the point of getting away when several other men came to help. They all carried the struggling and terrified animal to the doorway and, turning it over on its back, tied its legs with four bits of rope to the door-posts and the pillars of the verandah, so that it lay spread-eagled in the door. Then Panda Baba brought out an iron pot with three little lamps inside it and waved it three times over the pig. Then while Putchi and Tiblu brought bits of green bamboo and forced its mouth open, Bhuta took a handful of rice, waved it three times and pushed it into its mouth. "*Tere nare nana re saheb tere nare nana re nana,*" shouted the spectators triumphantly.

Now came the critical moment of the ceremony. Four men went to either side of the animal; they lifted the heavy log and placed it between its legs lengthwise along its body. The women began to scream obscenely; they were all possessed by a lust of cruelty. Bhuta gave the sign, and the men climbed on to the log and threw their whole weight upon the pig.

At its first high squeal of agony, Adri jumped up. "I feel sick," she said and ran out of the house, straight up to the top of the hill where her lover and the open forest were awaiting her.

But inside, in the stuffy house, reeking of sweat and liquor, the triumphant worship of Narayan, the Sun God, was proceeding. The men pushed the log to and fro, to and fro, while the women screamed their songs, until the pig's cries of pain were hushed by death. Then they all stood up, gasping. Someone poured boiling water into the creature's mouth, and they began to cut it up. The head and the liver were removed, wrapped in mahua leaves, and placed on a little wooden swing in a corner of the verandah. At just the right moment came a gust of wind and it swung a little to and fro. Everyone shouted in triumph for they knew that the god had come, was sitting on the pig's liver, and swinging to and fro. At once the women ran out into the court, picked up handfuls of dung and mud, and began to throw them at the men. But Tigli and Singaru and both Putchi's wives had to go to the kitchen with the remainder of the pig to cook it as soon as possible. As the others threw their bits of mud and dung, they sang the Laru song.

Terenana ke nano ho.
Victory, victory to Narayana.
Terenana terenana ke nano ho.

All the time Gamira was lying on the verandah near

the swing where the god still moved slowly to and fro. His fever had risen with the noise and excitement. " Where is Adri ? " he asked irritably. " She's not well, I think," said Satula, who was sitting by him massaging his arms and legs. Bhuta heard them and smiled to himself. She must be preparing her things for flight ; it was a good chance with everyone drunk here. How wonderful life would be to-morrow ; he trembled with excitement. In a few minutes the signal would come and then—an end to all his loneliness, a fire for the cold nights, a perfect revenge on Gamira.

At last Tigli and Singaru came out of the kitchen with a great dish piled high with rice and meat. They all shouted in welcome, and began to sing.

Bring water, bring water, I'll wash his feet with water.
Bring oil, bring oil, I'll wash his feet with oil.
Bring milk, bring milk, I'll wash his feet with milk.
Teri na ho ! na na re na ! teri na na mor na na !
Victory, victory to Narayana !

As they sang the last words, and Tigli and Singaru began to serve out the food, Bhuta got up and unobtrusively slipped out of the house.

III

All night Bhuta waited by the river. A leopard growled not twenty paces from him. Some deer came

down the bank to drink. A bank of heavy clouds drifted across the moon. It was a perfect night for flight. But there was no sign of Adri.

In a comfortless dawn he returned anxiously to the village. There was a group of men in front of Julan's house, talking excitedly. He joined them.

"What has happened?" he asked, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Haven't you heard? Adri has run away."

"What?" he gasped.

"Yes, with Sitaram Ahir, and who'll look after the cows now? There's nothing but trouble in this village."

"Where have they gone?"

"Who knows?"

CHAPTER XVIII

ADAMANTINE SPINDLE

All day Bhuta had been pacing up and down on the little plain among the stunted trees above the village. He had eaten nothing; the fury that was burning him made rest impossible. But he was a man again. As in the old days of the Serpent Dance he was capable of a grand rage. All day long he had pondered a revenge. It would have to be a wide and comprehensive revenge. The entire house of Julan must be destroyed. And destroyed at once. Somehow or other this very night he would do it. Fire, fire, fire—the words had begun to ring in his brain. But fire would only destroy the property—how was he to destroy their very lives?

It was night now, but Bhuta went on pacing up and down. He felt no trace of weariness or fear, though there was probably not another man in the village who would stay up in that lonely place at night, alone, without a lantern. And then, all of a sudden, there were wild shouts from the village, and women screaming, and then a blare of torches. Bhuta halted, surprised and curious. There was some trouble—and trouble was his meat and drink. Should he go down? He was on the point of doing so when something large and dark

and hairy brushed past him, and he heard the terrified cry of a child.

It was a tiger! And it had taken a child from the village. That much was clear. That was the meaning of all the noise, and the glare of torches coming up the hill. A tiger! Bhuta's rage was still on him. Who the child was he had no idea, but no tiger should dare to rob the village in his presence. Was he not a lord of nature, vassal of the old serpent king that had his court deep down below the earth. With a great shout he began to run after the tiger.

At the edge of the precipice that gave on to the forest lying below that ridge of hills, the great creature had halted, uncertain. It had dropped the child, and was standing above it roaring its defiance. Bhuta charged full into it. Unarmed, but strong in the madness of a perfect anger, he knocked the animal over on its side. But in a moment it was up and with an appalling roar had leapt upon him. It was still worrying his body, when the blaze of lights drew near. The child was screaming loudly, and guided by the sound a large body of villagers approached, led by Putchi, gun in hand. Directly he saw the tiger, he levelled his gun and fired. The bullet went wide, but frightened by the noise and the lights the tiger jumped for safety. Down into the ravine it went—crash—crash—crash—away into the heart of the jungle.

Bhuta was unconscious. He had terrible wounds on his chest and face. They lifted him and carried him very tenderly down to the village.

"What would he say if he knew that he had saved our child?" asked Satula. For the child was no other than little Nanas, whom Bhuta hated more than all the children of the village. The tiger had got into the house by the back way, and Nanas who had run out of the house for a moment, had been seized. But Satula had heard him scream, and snatching up an axe she had followed, and her cries had roused the village.

It was clear that Bhuta would not live out the night. Panda Baba sat beside him, all enmities forgotten. "The spirits are come," he whispered, "to carry him to God." As dawn came, he opened his eyes. "Adri, Adri," he gasped, and then closed them for ever.

Little Nanas was also badly injured. There was a long deep cut across his back. In the morning, Tigli carefully inspected it.

"Leave him to me," she said to Satula. "Only I must have twelve annas!"

"What for?" asked Satula, surprised.

"Never mind. You will see. You women are as inquisitive as bears outside an ant's-nest."

Presently there was a loud squealing, and Tiblu appeared, dragging behind him a small black pig.

"That's right," said Tigli. "Let's kill it."

With her own hands she cut the creature's throat, and caught the fresh warm blood in a brass vessel. Then she waddled inside the hut and began to bathe Nanas's wounds with it. The hot blood made the boy scream with pain, but the old woman took no notice, beyond a curt order to Satula to hold him more tightly. Then

Tiblu cut two large slices of the fat, and gave them to Tigli who laid them on the wounds as poultices. "Now take the pig away," she said, "and we will eat what remains in honour of Bhuta."

Gamira watched all these things, but with little interest. His fever had passed, and had left him with an extreme weakness. He was so weak that he had hardly felt Adri's desertion, though he was angry at the loss of so much jewellery. But Satula was with him all day—Nanas was put in the same hut, and she looked after them both together—and she was able to console him very greatly. Now in his weakness and loneliness, his mind turned constantly towards Phulmat. That was the girl for him; it was her he had always wanted. What a fool, what a complete fool, he had been to drive her away! He was sure that he had got leprosy, and he was no longer afraid of her. All he remembered was her merriness, her familiarity, her daring, her audacious coarseness.

If only Phulmat were here now! Her flame never flickered or went cold like Adri's. In his weakness, he thought of her as a wall between him and the world. He remembered the night they ran away, her courage and her songs; he remembered how she had saved his life on the night of the snake. He must have her back. What was that Karma Song: "*We shall meet, we shall meet at Diwali!*" Surely that was an omen, that and the recovery of the *dhar*. Surely it was an omen.

He called Tiblu, and begged him to go and look for her. "You can take my horse," he said. "I heard

that she was in Musamundi. You might try there. But such a girl cannot remain unknown. Someone will know where she is."

"To-day, I must be here," answered Tiblu, and he explained that he had to help the Baiga with the ceremonies of Bhuta's death. "But," he said, "to-morrow before cock-crow, I will go."

Bhuta had been killed by a tiger, and so was even more dangerous after death than he had been in his lifetime. Tiblu was temporarily out of caste because he had helped to carry him down to the village, so was Tigli for touching Nanas. The villagers were afraid that the tiger might try to take revenge on all those who gave help to its victims. Even Panda Baba for once was not anxious to conduct a ceremony, but himself suggested that the old Baiga should be called in to perform the funeral rites.

By midday he had come, and all the villagers, armed, some with axes, some with spears, a few with bows and arrows, assembled. Panda Baba came a little late, as befitted his position, with an old Gond sword. They first went up the hill to the spot where Bhuta had been killed; his blood still reddened the ground. The old Baiga, his matted hair falling about his shoulders, squatted down and began to make a crude image of a man out of the blood-stained earth. When it was ready, he placed it in a basket and very solemnly carried it down to the river, carefully avoiding the village street, the people following him. Arrived at the river's bank, he placed the image in front of him on the ground, and

began, in a high, droning voice, to tell the story of the world, from the creation down to the day of Bhuta's death. He told how Mother Earth was in throes of agony till the first Baigas were born, their great ancestors, Nanga Baiga and Nangin Baigin, who went naked and free, lords among the lordly forest trees. From them was born Bijaya Baiga the wise man, who knew the virtues of all plants and animals, and could lead tigers and leopards by the ear. Of him again was born the little tree with big leaves that presides over all prosperity and feeds the world with milk. From that tree came Thakur Deo, that kindly god who still protects mankind from malignant spirits. And of him was born his son and companion, Dhulaura Deo, and of him, Baisa Sur, the spirit who lurks in all clear waters and the running springs. His son was Annadeo, the God of Food, once a tiny hungry godling, then grown large on the milk of Brahma, and now in this Age of Darkness made thin again. And so the high droning voice went on, surveying a fantastic fairyland of legend, down to the loss of the freedom of the forest, to the days of hunger and disease, and to the tragedy of the previous night.

As the tale progressed, the old Baiga became more and more excited, until in a sort of wild ecstasy, he jumped to his feet, and with flashing eyes, rushed through the crowd down to the river. In a few moments he returned, leaping in the air and roaring like a tiger, contorting his features into an expression of greed and anger. He made straight for the little image and tried to

seize it, but Panda Baba and Tiblu who were standing ready caught hold of him and held him back. This was a moment of crisis. If through any accident he should be able to catch hold of the image and destroy it in his frenzy, then Bhuta's ghost would know no rest, and the village would be plagued. But if they could keep him back long enough for the spirit of the tiger that now possessed him to leave his body, then all would be well. A violent struggle followed, Putchi coming to the help of the others, and at the same time the crowd began to shout and scream. Rannu had a black cock in his hand, and he threw this high over their heads into a cluster of trees on the river bank.

At last the old Baiga was himself again. The spirit of the tiger left him. He sank down exhausted, and Panda Baba hastily put a bottle of wine to his lips. Refreshed by this, he was able to pick up Bhuta's image and carry it to the river, on the far side of which his body lay ready for burning. He went down into the water and stood there, while Panda Baba, Rannu, Putchi, Tiblu and several others gathered round him, holding in their hands a triple thread which Panda's wife had hastily prepared that morning. On the bank, Bhuta's uncle was sacrificing a cock over a small fire. Then in a loud voice the Baiga declared :

The wood of the castor tree !
The garden of the tiger !
Sound, O flute ! Blow, blow, O whirlwind !
O ghost, away, away ! Dead ghost, away !

Twelve kings I drive away.
Tiger of the Nail ! Tiger of the Rocks ! Tiger of the Jungle ! Tiger of the Mountains ! Away, away, away !
Awake, O hill ! Flee away, O death !
O rocks be overturned !
Tiger, away, away, away to the deep forest !
Drive the nail and break the thread !
Immortal Nail !
Immortal Charm !

As he repeated the last words, he jerked the thread and broke it, then solemnly immersed Bhuta's image in the river. After that they all climbed up the bank to the trees, and the Baiga took a long nail in his hand and a stone. With this he drove the nail into the largest of the trees, as far from the ground as possible. This, they knew, would close the tiger's jaws, and it would never trouble them again. And when this was done they all went back to the village to drink in memory of the dead.

Everyone had gone to the river save Julan who could not walk so far, Gamira and Nanas who were too ill, and old Tiharu and her daughter, the girl who had once been Bhuta's wife, driven out and forsaken by him. Tiharu sat by the fire, stroking her little beard, chuckling to herself. "He thought he would deceive us," she told her daughter who was lying pale and helpless on the floor against the wall. "He did his best, but your old mother was too clever for him. I sent that tiger, I sent

it." She gave another low laugh. A sound made her look round. The girl's face was in her hands, and her body was shaking with a storm of tears.

"How very queer girls are!" muttered the old witch.

CHAPTER XIX

TRIUMPHAL PATH

GOND girls love to sing in bed. Phulmat was lying contentedly on a pile of dry grass in a little hut not far from the village of Chiraidongri. She had had a good dinner the previous night, given her by a friendly Gond family of her own clan. The sun was coming in through the roof of the hut, but there was no need to get up : she had nothing to do. She was on pilgrimage, that was true, but the pilgrim-place could wait. There was no hurry.

And so she lay in bed and sang.

In the garden sow your seed.
The girl with gaily-coloured clothes
Showed her face behind her sari
For a moment, and then ran away.

That was herself, she reflected. Seeing the whole world behind a veil. But she dared not let people see her face at all. Always she had to go wandering on, homeless, companionless.

She sang again.

Youth passes quickly, quickly.
How short a while it stays !
But a girl's youth endures
For the shortest space of all.
Her breasts are ugly, fallen ;
He fondles them no longer
That once were his loved playthings.
Youth passes quickly, quickly.

In a sad mood she began to remember, thought of Tutta's body as they dragged it out of the burning house, of the sahib's hurried, furtive departure, of the funeral feast in the village. How often men said they were dying for her, but only poor Tutta had died for her in truth. She took out the little charm that the sadhu had given long ago, saw the patient tortured figure on the cross, remembered fleetingly a phrase—*He had died for his friends*—understood little, but drew comfort from it. The man had called it a charm of all comfort. And, yes, the charm was working. She felt cheerful again. The sun poured more strongly through the thatch. She got up and went out to the morning and the road.

Her heart sang, for to-day she would come to the abode of Pawan Dassorie, the Wind, and there at that holy place she hoped to be cleansed and healed. By mid-day she had reached Chiraidongri. The village lay by the railway, stretched along the road. On the left, under a giant pipal tree, was a shrine to Mahadeo. On the other side was an abrupt little hill, covered with a light veil of trees.

Phulmat went up to an elderly man who was standing by the shrine.

"Is this Chiraipat?" she asked rather shyly, nodding towards the hill.

"Yes, but no woman has ever climbed the hill," he said severely. "No woman ever asks about it. It is the order of the god."

"I did not know. I am a stranger," she said demurely. "But why is that?"

"Have you never heard what happened here in the old days?" he asked, astonished. "How, high up on that hill, there was a hole like the hole of a giant snake, how Pawan Dassorie made that place his home, and how so great was the power of his breath that no one could live in this village. From the hill there always blew a great wind, beating down the crops, lifting the roofs from the houses and battering down the walls. Men and women were caught by the wind and hurled into the air. . . ."

"But there is no danger now," she remarked.

"No, for they called a Baiga, and he climbed the hill and put a great stone on the mouth of Pawan Dassorie's cave, sealing it with his magic. And now every three years we sacrifice a pig there before the stone, and all the year round those in trouble take coconuts and other offerings to the place. And so now the wind who was our enemy has become our friend, for it blows every disease and all trouble from this village. When plague and cholera come to the villages round us, Pawan Dassorie blows mightily, and drives the evil far away."

"Now I must go to Pawan Dassorie," she said.

"What?" he shouted. "No woman has ever been there. It is the order of the god."

"All the same I am going," she cried, and ran across the road, leaving the old man bewildered and angry by the shrine. She crossed the road, crossed a field, broke through a low hedge, and began to climb the hill. As she went she turned and saw the old man going hastily towards the village.

Phulmat climbed up and up. It was not a very high hill, but it gave an illusion of height, the surrounding land was so very flat. It was a true Chiraidongri, Hill of the Bird, and Phulmat felt as if she were really a bird, caught skyward, and with a bird's vision.

She first went to Pawan Dassorie, finding without difficulty the stone half buried in the ground which covered the great cave where he lived. Only a little wind blew round it. But for a long time she sat there, wondering, and very happy, remembering how this pure god had led her, and in all her wanderings had never left her quite solitary. Then she got up and wandered about the hill-top, among the tall grasses, till she found Chiraipat, the place of the bird, at the foot of a manjani tree. There was nothing there at all, it was a true Gond shrine, save the broken coconut shells scattered about. Phulmat sat there for a few moments, but it was not for this that she had come, and she soon went back to the edge of the hill where Pawan Dassorie lived.

For a long hour she rested on that hill-top; presently, she thought, she would go to the village and beg some

coconuts. Then, as she dreamed, she was disturbed by a noise of shouting below the hill. She went to the edge and looked down. There was a crowd of men looking up at her, talking and shouting in great excitement. When they saw her they all began to cry out: "Come down," "Come down," "Witch," "Go away from here," and "Witch," "Witch," constantly repeated.

Phulmat knew well what might happen to her in a strange village if she was suspected of being a witch, so she ran as fast as her feet would let her across the hill and down the other side. For a long way she dared not take the road, but wandered on through a thin jungle till the angry cries no longer echoed in her ears.

The hostility of the villagers did not trouble her. That was nothing. She had broken their silly rules, and of course they hated her. She soon forgot them, and went onward in a great exultation. She had made a pilgrimage. She was purified by that legend-laden wind.

Singing gaily, she went on and on over the flat, dull, fertile country towards Seoni.

The wind blows down from the mountain,
It ruffles and tosses my hair.
I have crossed the seven hills for you,
And the wind is in my hair.
Behind the clouds shines the lightning,
It flickers across the sky.
As a stranger I wander over the world,
For the wind is in my hair.

But a day's journey across the dusty plain left her, by evening, exhausted in body and mind. She remembered that she was a daughter of the hills, and her heart fled away to the great cool forest clambering across the rocks and uplands of Mulmula. The burden of fate was on her. The great wheel was turning. The disease that had devoured her shapely body was now attacking her very mind and soul. If only she had Gamira with her to help her bear it. If only she could sleep once in his arms—*lapatke*—so close that not a breath of air could pass between them !

She sat by the roadside on the outskirts of a little hamlet, and drew her sari close about her face as she heard footsteps approaching. As they came nearer she peeped out and saw that it was an old man apparently as weary as herself. He fell rather than sat down beside her, and it was some time before he could speak. When he did, he told her that he too was a Pardhan, bound on pilgrimage to the source of the Wainganga, that lovely river which traces its rocky and erratic course among the hills of Seoni. " I have to go to Mundara," he told her. " It is on the far side of Seoni."

Phulmat went and got the old man some water, and they shared what food they had, a little fruit and some parched gram. As they ate, he told her a little parable. " The Cow-mother, Sleep, Sorrow and Wealth once met together and disputed who was the greatest.

" ' I am the greatest,' said the Cow-mother. ' For even by my dung the crops of the whole world grow.'

" ' I am the greatest,' said Sleep. ' For even though

you have sorrow and pain all day long, I can cure it in the evening.'

"'I am the greatest,' said Wealth. 'For where I live there is no sorrow.'

"'It is true,' said Sorrow. 'You are greater than I. For in your presence I have to flee away.' So, my daughter, let us go to sleep ; we will forget our sorrows, and to-morrow you shall come with me to Mundara."

When she told him that she was out of the tribe, and that by travelling with her he might also be troubled, he laughed. "When a man is sleepy," he said, "he will lie down on a bier ; a lover never asks if his beloved is caste or outcaste ; if you are dying of thirst, you will drink the water in which a chamar's loin-cloth has been washed. So a hungry man cares not where his food comes from. And I am hungry for a companion. We will go together."

He was a good old man. His name was Maswasi, named after the goddess of the chase. He enlivened the way for her. He was what her old Pardhan husband would have been by now had she remained with him. He taught her some more songs, and showed her everything of interest by the way. They passed the Nagarkhana Hill, where, he told her, you could still hear sometimes the ghost drums of the Gond king calling his army to war, wandered about Seoni bazaar and laughed at the great solemn crane that stalked to and fro among the booths, and ten miles out of the town came to the little village of Mundara.

The old man had refused to tell her the story of the

place till they should come in sight of the trees that shaded the tank where Wainganga had its birth. When at last they saw them, it was a bright morning, and he sat down under a tree. "Now I will tell you the story of Wainganga," he said.

"Long, long ago, in this place, there lived a Gond landlord with his beautiful daughter Ganga. There was also a boy named Beni who was serving seven years for her. These two loved each other greatly. In this place there was no water, and even the wild animals fainted for thirst. Then one day the landlord took his spade and went to dig for water. But he could not find any, till at last the Earth Mother came to him in a dream and said: 'I'll give you water if you will offer me an unmarried Gond boy and girl.' The landlord was very troubled, for there was no one else to give but the two from his own house, but, all the same, that evening he left his spade at the place where he was digging, and the next morning he told the boy to go and fetch it. Away went Beni, and when he arrived at this very spot in front of you, the water gushed up out of the ground and he was drowned. Ganga waited all day for his return, and at last took his food and a pot of water and went out to find him. But when she came here there was no Beni, but only a pool of water. Then she cried out: 'If you are truly my beloved, show yourself.' And out of the water rose the hands of the boy. 'But many have hands like that,' she cried. 'Show me the ring I gave you.' A second time the hands came up out of the water, and this time the sun shone on the copper ring that she had

given her lover. Then seeing that he was drowned, she jumped into the water, and his arms clasped her, and took her down. That was how the Wainganga River began."

And there on the right side of the tank was the little temple in which the Gond boy and girl are still worshipped, the boy in a white dhoti and red shirt with an orange turban, and the girl in a green sari covered with a red cloth. Then they went to the other shrines, and they saw many gods and goddesses broken under the trees. "They've gone cold and dead now," said Maswasi chuckling. A band of villagers had brought the ashes of a dead relation to throw into the tank, and when they had watched this ceremony, Phulmat and Maswasi bathed in the holy waters.

When they had finished, spread their wet clothes in the sun to dry, and covered themselves with a scanty change of raiment, they found an old sadhu sitting on the steps of the tank. Phulmat thought she had never seen anyone so old and so holy. He was almost naked, his beard flowed to his waist. He had a far-travelled, learned look, and the people were whispering that he was the hermit Shuddhananda, no ordinary sadhu, but a man who, before he renounced the world, had held a high position in the state. Phulmat stood on the edge of the little crowd that had gathered round him. Some Brahmin pilgrims were asking him questions.

"I desire to know and follow the way of peace," said one of them, a tired, harassed-looking man.

"Peace of your own heart is easy to come by——"

"No, it is not that."

"Peace of the world, peace of the mind that hungers endlessly—there is a heroic struggle. In my youth I trod the hot roads of Hindusthan from Hrishikesh to Rameshwar. And everywhere I found greed, hatred, weariness, anxiety. Presently it was shown me that there is one root of all—the thirst to possess." His disciples—there were four of them—hearing their master speaking, came from the temple and stood behind him. The scene left a deep impression on Phulmat's mind, though she understood little of what was said—the old hermit whose spirit shone through the luminous flesh, the saffron robes against the hard white steps of the tank, the sunlight thrusting its way through the cool darkness of the trees. Peeping shyly through the folds of her sari she looked again into the old hermit's face; it shone with an other-worldly serenity and confidence. She looked too at the disciples; one of them specially caught her attention—a youth, almost a boy, of an unusual beauty, beauty which even the shaving of his head had not destroyed. He was gazing at his master with an expression of intense eagerness and longing, living on every word. This boy had peace, thought Phulmat, surely he must be innocent; she suddenly loved him altogether maternally. But Shuddhananda was speaking again. "I too understand desire, for my heart loved beauty"—the boy leant forward suddenly—"and not only the beauty of women, though above all other earthly loveliness is the loveliness of women, but the beauty that the heart seeks in its solitude."

"And that passes?" asked the boy, almost in a whisper, timidly as though he dreaded the reply.

"That also passes. In Eternity we shall see not Beauty, but Truth. For Beauty delights the heart, but Truth alone satisfies the spirit. Beauty is—is the touch of moonlight on a moving stream, but Truth is the unseen light of the mind which survives the breaking of the lantern in which it dwells."

Phulmat found it impossible to follow the talk; many of the words, even, meant nothing to her, but she watched the faces of the speakers. She had never seen anything like this before; the sadhus who generally came to their villages were opium-eating rascals who took their money and seduced the girls; the Brahmins that lived in their Gond villages were generally landlords or money-lenders, sellers of opium or ganja, bullying revenue officers or police. But here were sadhus and Brahmins who had something of the purity and nobility of the divine heroes of old. Though she did not know it, she was looking at that moment on the real strength of Hinduism that has the power of drawing from its ancient treasure-store ever new reserves of strength, and in times of utmost decadence flowers in saint after saint.

"Then how are we to find this path of truth?" asked another of the pilgrims.

"You are to live in your body as a guest lives in the house of his friend. Be courteous to it, for long are you to remain there. But the body is no more than the tree by the wayside under whose shade we rest."

"And if the body grows unruly?" asked the boy sadhu shyly.

"Slay it; trample on it." The old ascetic seemed to grow in stature as he spoke. "Would you sleep on the coils of a serpent? Would you lodge in a tiger's cave? Slay first the tiger and the cave is yours. You can do nothing for the world till the snake is dead. An impure man who tries to help the world is like a corpse adorned with fair jewels—or a donkey bathing in the holy Ganges."

The boy came forward, and standing by the hermit began to fan him gently.

"And you must be humble. Solitude will be your food and drink. Your friends will be the wind and sky, your loves the forest trees. It is the branch laden with fruit that bends most deeply to the earth as if reverencing its mother. But above all dread the senses, just as"—the hermit smiled—"the elephant dreads the death-giving roar of the tiger."

"Tell us, sadhuji, what are the marks of a saint?" asked another of the pilgrims.

The hermit was silent for a few moments. He seemed to be gathering up all his scattered memories. "I have seen very few saints," he said at last, "but from what I have seen I can say that above all else the saint is a man absorbed in God. He has neither friends nor foes, for in every man he sees the face of God. He is tranquil, for he sees in every joy or sorrow the hand of God. He does not fear death, for he knows that it will only lead him nearer still to God. He lives for the

happiness of others, worshipping God in his fellow-men."

"Then he may work for the world?" asked the Brahmin who had first spoken.

"His whole life is for the world. But his work will not be tainted by egoism. He has no interest in its fruit, its success or failure. And then I think that the saint will be compassionate. He is the father of all the sorrowful. He is more yielding than wax to the frailties of others; he is harder than a diamond to his own. He is dead in the midst of life; he is awake in the midst of sleep. His quest costs him all the world, even life itself. But when men see him the fetters of the world are broken. He has become a fountain of liberation."

As the sadhu talked, Phulmat began to feel an intense longing for her own country. Through the old man's voice she seemed to hear the waters of Narbada her mother calling to her. She must go to her own mountains. This alien range of Seoni was not for her; she must go back to the Maikal Hills, to Narbada the daughter of Maikal who, when Mahadeo called on all the hills of Hindusthan to give his river shelter, alone responded.

She had been away too long. She would go and bathe in the waters of Kapildara, in that authentic flood that washed away sin. Who knew if Wainganga could do anything? She had decided in a moment. She said good-bye to old Maswasi, made a deep reverence to the sadhu, and within an hour was on her way.

But the mood of inspiration quickly passed. Her feet were very painful, and she walked more and more slowly as the sun rose high above her. By evening she had not done five miles, and she was sitting in weariness and dejection, in a great hatred of her tainted cloying flesh, when she heard a horse being urged hastily along the road. She looked up, and to her astonishment saw Tiblu—and the horse was Gamira's. Recognition of that fact took her breath away. Now at last he must have sent for her.

He recognized her at once, for even veiled there was something about her unmistakable, and came to a halt before her. She ran to him, caught the horse's neck, patted it tenderly.

" What news ? " she cried, but keeping herself carefully veiled.

" He is ill and has sent me to bring you," he said.

He dismounted, and then, as it was late, they walked on together towards the next village. As they went he told her all the news of Singaru and their child, of Adri's flight, of the illness, stressing how Gamira called continually for her, of Bhuta's death. When she heard of that she nodded. " That is why he has sent for me. All along he was under the spell of that man, and now he is dead he is free once again, and wants me."

But it was long before she would consent to go. It was only late that night that she at last said to Tiblu : " Very well, go to-morrow and tell him that I will come for Diwali. Tell him "—her voice faltered—" that my body is wasted to a cowrie, but that I can never forget

our wonderful love. My life burns for him like leaves in a forest fire. He has always been my king. Tell him that, but do not tell him this "—and she drew back the sari from her face, and for the first time showed herself unveiled. "Look at my face," she said. "Look at my hands and feet. Do you think he will have me again in the house?"

Tiblu felt miserable. He knew Gamira too well, knew his fear of leprosy, knew his passion for a lovely face. He would never take the girl like this.

"I know he won't have me," she went on. "But I want to see him, I want to be near him. I can live with Julan. We won't give him any trouble. He can take any other girl he likes, but I must be there in the house. I have had enough of loneliness."

Tiblu remembered then all that Phulmat had suffered. He gave her five rupees, and told her to take a bus back to Mandla and Dindori, as far as a bus would go.

"And I will do this," he went on. "I will go back and tell him that you will come at Diwali, and I will say that you are as you were before, that you are still queen of the forest in your beauty. And so you are," he added, standing up and looking at her when she had veiled her face again. "You have the body of a true queen."

CHAPTER XX

PROMETHEAN CONQUEROR

GAMIRA was sitting near the little shrine of Thakur Deo outside the village, watching the road for Tiblu's return. For days he had been waiting, consumed by impatience and desire. He was still weak after his illness, and when Julan laughed at him, he pointed out that he couldn't do any other work, so he might as well satisfy himself.

At last he saw his own horse coming along the road, and Tiblu, but they were alone.

"Did you find her? Is she coming? What has happened?" he shouted as soon as they were within earshot. He ran to them, fairly pulled Tiblu out of the saddle. "Tell me quickly, what is the matter?" he demanded.

"I found her, six days' journey away. She will be here by Diwali. I gave her money to come in a bus to Dindori."

"What is she like? Is she still beautiful?"

"She is lovely as the half of a mango, or the white heart of a coconut. There is no one like her in this country."

"How is she? Has she money?"

" She is poor ; her clothes are worn and tattered ; she has no ornaments. She must have been faithful to you."

" She spoke of me ? "

" She told me to say that never once had you been out of her mind, that for all these years she had been dying for you, that as she went through jungle after jungle, passed river after river, climbed mountain after mountain, your face danced before her eyes." And he said much more of the same kind, till Gamira could hardly restrain his excitement. " Come, come," he cried. He seized him by the arm and dragged him towards the village.

" She is coming," he shouted to Panda Baba, meeting him outside his house. Panda Baba nodded rather grimly. That was all very well, calling the poor girl back after the other one had left him. Besides, she was out of the tribe, and you couldn't play about with your tribal rules like that. What an expensive feast he himself had had to give for his son ! He decided to have a word with Julan at the first opportunity.

But Gamira did not notice. He went on to the house. " She's coming ! " he shouted to Satula. Nanas, now old enough to handle a plough, came in at that moment, and smiled delightedly.

" But she is out of the tribe. What are we to do about that ? " asked Satula.

" I will give a dinner," said Gamira. He was a rich man now, and not afraid of anyone.

" But how can you ? "

"What do these people know? I tell you I will give the best dinner that the Pardhans have ever eaten, and they'll all come running to touch my feet."

"Quite right, quite right." Julan was very old and frail, he hardly ever moved from his corner. But his eyes were alert as ever; he watched his little world with close attention. Phulmat was coming and he was glad. He was the Mokasi, and he would order her readmission.

All that week, Satula—as far as her infirmities would let her—prepared for Phulmat's home-coming. She made sweetmeats; sent Nanas to fetch two goats; helped Gamira choose new saris and ornaments from the bazaar. Jiggeri ground a basket of wheat, cleaned rice in readiness, picked over the dal, selected cooking-pots. They were possessed by excitement. The lost image of Phulmat had captured them. They recalled her fun, her quaint poetic sayings, her unfailing kindness and good-humour, her song and dance. Gamira could not sit still for a moment: he was really like a fish in the dried-up bed of a stream. He could hardly eat.

But on the day before Diwali, Panda Baba put in his word. Julan had expected this. The *gunia* was careful to explain that it was none of his business; he was not a Pardhan; but if they would listen to the advice of an old man, they would benefit. The rule was quite plain. If they took Phulmat back they would be excommunicated by all the other Pardhans.

Of course, they knew that very well, but every one of them had refused to recognize the unwelcome fact. Gamira became very angry.

"What do we care about the other Pardhans? And why don't you mind your own business?" he said rudely to Panda Baba.

"We are going to give up field work and start a big shop here," said Julan aggressively. "Gamira will be a money-lender, and soon everyone will be our slaves."

Panda Baba was shocked. He was shocked at their plan, even more than hurt at their rudeness, rudeness towards him, their lifelong friend.

"Listen," he said to Gamira. "You belong to the Netam clan, isn't that so?"

"Yes," said Gamira, a little uneasily.

"And do you know what happened to Netam Raja, the first of your clan?"

"How should I know these foolish old stories?"

"Then I will tell you. In the Age of Righteousness Netam Raja was the greatest of the Gond kings. He said: 'Let us go and worship Bara Deo.' He called all the world to go with him for worship. He travelled with a great company, they were all poor men, he alone was rich. Then on the way, they stopped for food in a clearing of the forest, and while everyone else was cooking on stone ovens and with earthen pots, he made his oven of sugar and his cooking-pots of *ghee*. The rest of the company soon finished and went on to the River Girwa, but whenever Netam Raja lit his fire, the pots melted and the sugar collapsed. He took so long to prepare his food that he was left behind. The others came to the river, and crossed it by catching hold of a great creeper that stretched from side to side. When

they were over, they pulled up the creeper by the roots and threw it away. Then came Netam Raja, and found he couldn't get across. So he began to shout and curse. Then a tortoise came and offered to take him over. . . ."

" I know all about tortoises," interrupted Gamira rudely.

" I am not talking of tortoises," replied Panda Baba severely. " I am telling you about Netam Raja. The tortoise took him over, and they were all very happy when they found the king among them. Then said Netam Raja : 'If you want to be happy, make your oven of stone and your cooking-pots of earth ; don't try to make them of sugar and *ghee*, for only earth can stand the fire.' And so we Gonds must remain near to the earth, and then no fire can destroy us. If you start a shop and become a money-lender, you are trying to cook with a pot made of *ghee*, and you will fail."

They moved uneasily, but no one said anything.

" And I remember," went on Panda Baba inexorably, " an old man once told me that at the very beginning, God was wondering who should carry on the work of the world. So he made this test. He made three chairs, one of gold, one of silver, one of earth. Then he called a Mussalman, a Hindu and a Gond, and asked them to choose which they would. The Mussalman sat down in the golden chair, the Hindu took the silver chair, but the Gond chose the earthen chair. Then God said : ' It is the Gond who is fit to carry on the work of the world, for only he who can sit on an earthen chair will be able to bear the hardships that are bound to

come.' And so God made the Gonds the support and refuge of the world. And, my brothers, you have been my friends for many years, and I say to you, do not get the disease of pride and try to sit in gold and silver chairs. Our fathers took the earth for their home, and we should live where they lived."

"Yes, you are right," said Julan at last. "It has always been so."

But Gamira was angry and refused to speak, and so after a time the old man went away.

The first day of green Diwali, golden Diwali was bright and clear, the very day for the fulfilling of good omens. But though Gamira watched the road all day, she never came. So in the late afternoon, he saddled his horse, and rode down the road towards Ramnagar, the road by which she was sure to come. He had on his best clothes, and clutched in one hand the *dhar* he had given her long ago, and which he would give her again. He went very quickly, for his agitation passed into the horse, and they galloped part of the way.

The most lovely girl in that country! She was his Phulmat still. Tiblu had said so. Perhaps it had not been leprosy at all. He reined in his horse. What was that white figure sitting quietly by the roadside, a girl with a sari over her head? But he came closer and saw that it was only a white milestone, half hidden by the waving grasses. She was the most lovely girl. What a fool he had been ever to turn her away! She would suit him far better than Adri. The way she put her arms about a man, her kisses, her laughter! He could hardly

contain himself as he thought of her. They would certainly not take any notice of Panda Baba and his mud chairs! Mud chairs indeed! He would become a Raj-Pardhan now, and wear a sacred thread, and sit in a silver chair like all the other Hindus, and if he wanted to open a shop he would. The most lovely girl. He urged his horse forward.

Phulmat stood outside the door of the landlord's house at Ramnagar. The landlord was a rich merchant from South India who had settled there, finding that Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, blessed him in his dealings with the poor Gonds. It was evening, and they had just begun to light the little lamps for Diwali. "*O green Diwali! O green Diwali! We will meet, we will meet at Diwali!*" she murmured to herself. Through the door she could see the elders of the household, in their smart white coats and turbans of pink silk, the great account books open before them, the family priest reciting the customary prayers. Outside someone let off a string of crackers and there were excited cries of children.

Then from within they brought a great bowl of milk, and tipped it over so that it flowed in broad streams out into the road. It was the river of milk that the Goddess of Prosperity would send her worshippers.

The old priest raised his hands in blessing. "May every river be a river of milk. May every hill be a hill of butter. May every stone become a grain of wheat." They shouted with delight. Lakshmi, the sweet mother of wealth, would surely bless them.

Outside, Annadeo, the poor little Gond godling, God of Food, shivered in the evening air, for he was hungry, wrapped his rags about him, and went his way to the jungle. Phulmat walked slowly on along the road.

The glow of sunset deepened in the sky. She went on more and more slowly. She was desperately tired. All along the way, her feet had been hurting her, her whole body ached, sometimes she could hardly stand for giddiness. Perhaps she was going to die. At the thought a great peace came to her. She took out her charm of all comfort and kissed it. It had not saved her from tragedy, but somewhere, dimly, it had brought a meaning into it. "*We will meet, we will meet.*" She would surely see him before she died. Then suddenly she felt frightened, and sat down heavily by the roadside.

She heard a horse coming down the road, looked up, caught her breath as she recognized the rider, felt an intolerable joy and pain. He drew near, then he too started, and the horse reared wildly in the air. The sunset flamed blood-red across the sky. He brought the horse into control, stood still, looked down upon her.

She lifted her sari, and gazed up at him with an eternity of love in her eyes. But he saw only a face which had no beauty that he could desire, ravaged and marred almost beyond human semblance. He gasped with horror. Bring *this* to his house? For *this* be excommunicated? It was impossible. But he must give her the *dhar*, or a curse would rest on him.

He threw them to her, then without a word turned

his horse with a desperate terrified tug of the reins, dug his heels into its flanks and galloped away, away from the red sunset that filled the sky.

One of the *dhar* fell in her lap, the other struck her charm and spun off into the road. Phulmat grasped her cross of all comfort a little closer and drew her sari across her face.

In the road, the shield of the *dhar* shone red in the sunset, but the little silver chains that had kissed the cheeks of her youth lay buried in the dust.

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